

The Challenges Facing Changemakers in
Increasing Museum Collection & Exhibit Inclusivity

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Abstract

Over the last forty years, growing demands from activists and stakeholders have increased pressure on museums throughout the United States to diversify their permanent collections, exhibitions and programming by including artists representative of the population and welcoming diverse audiences, representative of society at large. The calls for diversification come from internal and external stakeholders, including museum staff and boards, and broader, public demands for museums to support ongoing social change by modernizing museum collections, business practices, and visitor experiences to align to contemporary social norms, including gender, racial, and class equality. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, long considered the gold standard for US museums, embodies the challenges many arts institutions face in demonstrating the institutional flexibility and financial health required to adequately respond to calls for change. After attempting a wide range of diversification strategies – from quick tactical fixes to broad strategic initiatives – with varying outcomes, museums continue struggling to answer calls for diversification. This paper reviews a spectrum of known approaches – from public relations stunts, to temporary exhibitions and programming, to the creation of new curatorial lines, to broad-sweeping mission changes – undertaken by museums across the US intent upon imparting change. The paper concludes that successful changemakers first align board and museum staff to a shared mission, and then commit long-term financial resources to fulfilling the mission. In assessing the inclusion program outcomes for several museums, the paper observes more significant progress among regional institutions, where board priorities align to community demographics. Chapter One describes the historical and contemporary roles of the museum within American society and provides a literature review of scholarly work proposing alterations to traditional museum approaches designed to preserve museums' ongoing relevance. Chapter Two explores how the fiscal and decision-making frameworks typically underpinning museum operating structures often impede institutional change, including diversification initiatives, highlighting the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a case study. Chapter Three analyzes a public museum, The Smithsonian Museum of Art, and its efforts to sustain organizational and structural change to promote inclusivity, by examining its efforts to increase Latinx institutional representation with an initiative to develop the museum's permanent collection and programming. Finally, Chapter Four looks at the ongoing efforts of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art (VMFA), to align the full breadth of its mission and operations – including permanent collection and programming, museum attendance and audience mix, and donor base – to its regional demographic population.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Defining the Current State of Diversity and Representation in U.S. Museums	5
Chapter 1 Institutional Identity: The Modern Role of the U.S. Art Museum	14
Chapter 2: Who Holds the Power? Organizational Structure and J.P. Morgan at the Met	29
Chapter 3: The Smithsonian's Crawl to Latinx Institutional Representation	44
Chapter 4: Successful Institutional Transformation: A Look Inside the VMFA	57
Conclusion	73

List of Illustrations

Figure i: Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, screenprint on paper

Figure ii: Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1993

Figure iii: Annie Mae Young, *Housetop Variation*, undated, Fabric

Figure iv: Thornton Dial, *Crossing Waters*, 2006-2011, wire fencing, clothing, cloth, wood, metal, corrugated tin, shoe, ceramic figurines, and paint on canvas on wood

Figure v: Eldren Bailey, *Pyramid*, 1970s, concrete, plastic beads, pennies, jewelry, buttons, wood

Figure vi: Melesio Casas, *Humanscapes 62*, 1970, acrylic on canvas

Figure vii: Ester Hernandez, *Sun Mad*, 1982, screenprint on paper

Figure viii: Delilah Montoya, *Desire Lines, Baboquivari Peak, AZ*, 2004, inkjet print

Figure ix: Benjamin Wigfall, *Chimneys*, 1951, oil on canvas

Figure x: Kehide Wiley, *Rumors of War*, 2019, bronze statue on limestone base

Figure xi: Thornton Dial, *Old Buck: The Negro Got to Find Out What's Going on in the United States*, 2002, carpet, oil, enamel, spray paint, splash zone compound on canvas and wood

Figure xii: Thornton Dial, *Freedom Cloth*, 2005, cloth, coat hangers, steel, wire, artificial plants and flowers, enamel, and spray paint

Figure xiii: Thornton Dial, *Tree of Life (In the Image of Old Things)*, 1994, found wood, roots, rubber tire, wire, fabric, plastic air freshener, enamel, industrial sealing compound

Introduction: Defining the Current State of Diversity and Representation in U.S. Museums

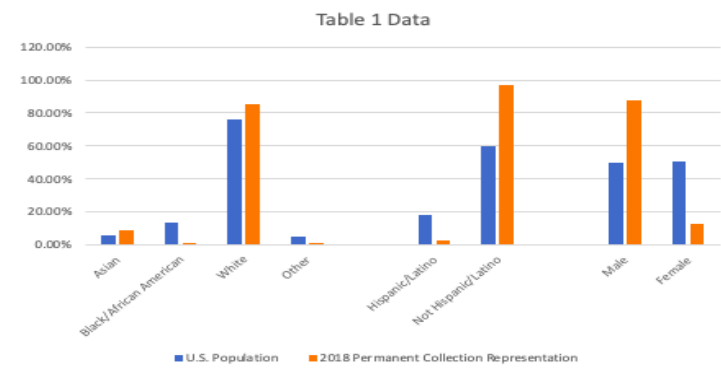
In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) *An international survey of recent painting and sculpture* exhibition featured 169 artists, including fewer than 8% female artists. The same show included only eight artists of color – fewer than 5%.¹ Frustrated, several anonymous female artists formed “the Guerrilla Girls” and committed to championing gender and racial equality in the arts. For the next forty years, the group pooled their skills to produce prints and posters calling out inequities in the art world, including the lack of diversity in museum permanent collections and exhibitions. The Guerrilla Girls increasingly leveraged clever messaging designed with public relations in mind, catching the attention of the national media with colorful pieces like *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum* (fig. i), criticizing New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (“the Met”) for maintaining a permanent collection disproportionately representative of male artists. Through their ongoing work, the Guerrilla Girls challenge museums – and the people running them – questioning their obligation to diversify permanent collections and exhibitions, not only to broaden and enrich the texture of the exhibits, but to align museums' collections to the audience demographics the institutions serve. Yet, even after forty years' work, the Guerrilla Girls cite little change, by 2012, the number of women artists in the Met's permanent collection ranked a paltry 4% according to the Guerrilla Girls' updated 2012 survey.²

¹ *The Guerrilla Girls: The Art of Behaving Badly* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020), 5.

² “Guerrilla Girls: Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?, 2012,” *Whitney Museum of American Art*, Accessed March 2022, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/46999>

Credited with starting an important conversation about inequality, the Guerrilla Girls inspired others to point out the diversity missing in museum permanent collections and exhibits.³ Current events and social justice movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, heightened focus on all aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion in society, business and culture, and the arts.⁴ For hundreds of years, the diversity of museums' permanent collections went unreported, until a 2018 study, completed with support from the American Association of Museum Directors, analyzed the permanent collections of eighteen US museums. As shown in Table 1, the study's findings revealed a dramatic under-representation among the sample set, with 87% of the permanent collection artists identified as men and 85% identified as white.⁵ Compared to the 2019 US Census, which reported that 50.8% of the surveyed US population identify as female and 76.3% identify as white,⁶ the studied museum collections dramatically over-represent the white, male populations as a proportion of the United States population.

Table 1



³ Chad Topaz, Bernhard Klingenberg, Daniel Turek, Brianna Heggeseth, Pamela Harris, Julie Blackwood, Ondine Chavoya, Steven Nelson, and Kevin Murphy, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums," PLOS One (2019): 8.

⁴ Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (New York: Verso, 2021), 1.

⁵ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 8.

⁶ "Quick Facts," *United States Census Bureau*, Accessed March 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>

To date, reporting the diversity of museums' permanent collections remains inconsistent and incomplete, with surveys conducted sporadically and only including a small subset of US museums. And report metrics vary – sometimes focusing on permanent collections and other times only including specific exhibits or acquisitions, increasing the difficulty in tracking longitudinal progress. The few sporadic reports available compare museum collection representation to the US population as a proxy for artist distribution by gender and race – because census data fails to accurately reflect the number of working artists throughout time, much less broken out by demographic group. By any measure, the over-representation of white artists and male artists leaves other populations, such as artists of color and female artists, under-represented. As such, poorly diversified museum collections fall short in addressing the full US cultural heritage, or even representing the cultural heritage of their audience, raising the question as to the mission of museums and whom museums serve.

Two chapters from *Museums and Communities* address increasing diversity and inclusion in museums. This first, written by anthropologist George Macdonald contends that museums, as institutions, are products of the society, and time, in which they were created.⁷ Because of society's evolution, museums must grow and mature to remain relevant and support their evolving audience.⁸ Created by and for an economic and social elite, the original museum mission breaks with contemporary social requirements and sentiment.⁹ Macdonald asserts, "Museums are often perceived as preserving for

⁷ George Macdonald, "Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society," in *Museums and Communities*, edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992): 158.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 160.

posterity that which society considers to be of value; if museums don't represent all elements of society, they run the risk of alienating those groups."¹⁰ Macdonald's argument establishes the necessity for US museums to change at an institutional level, starting with assessing their current state and understanding the root causes of stasis.

The second, written by curator Edmund Gaither, explores pluralism in American museum spaces.¹¹ Gaither asserts that, "many cultural groupings that previously have been rendered invisible in our population no longer accept that status,"¹² Gaither highlights the changing demographics of the US as a key reason museums need to make changes and broaden their holdings and viewing audiences.¹³ He also argues that the existence of culturally specific museums does not exempt encyclopedic institutions from the obligation to expand their collections to increase understanding of diverse cultures.¹⁴ Gaither's work supports the case for museums diversifying their collections as a matter of social responsibility.

Historians commonly refer to the US, metaphorically, as a "melting pot," a nod to the many nationalities and cultures that melded together to form a new, stronger alloy of the country.¹⁵ Inherent to the melting pot, steadily shifting demographics, make the very society contemporary museums serves a richly textured – and evolving – fabric.¹⁶ The changing face of the US population creates challenges for museum administrators and

¹⁰ Ibid., 161.

¹¹ Edmund Gaither "Hey! That's Mine: Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums," in *Museums and Communities*, edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer, and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992): 56.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵ Alberto Bisin and Thierry Verdier, "Beyond the Melting Pot': Cultural Transmission, Marriage, and the Evolution of Ethnic and Religious Traits," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2009):1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

curators, whose mission is to serve the breadth of the audience with collections and exhibits that represent the full range of their wide-spanning cultural heritage. Yet, in looking at who actually visits museums, data shows steadily declining attendance with a consistently white, and aging population – that doesn't match the US population.¹⁷

In 2020, the US Census Bureau announced projections for the US non-Hispanic white population to shrink between 2016 and 2060 – the only ethnic group projected for a population decline over the period.¹⁸ According to the projections, by 2045, non-Hispanic whites will represent a minority of the US population.¹⁹ With other populations growing, and the population of non-Hispanic whites shrinking, the US finds itself in the midst of a significant demographic shift. To prepare for this future, museums should embrace audience data, and prepare to adapt to serve those audiences, to preserve their institutions' relevance – as a matter of their boards' fiduciary responsibility to serve the museum's long-term best interests.

With so many boards dominated by business leaders, the stakeholders advocating for diversification need to start using more data-driven arguments to make their cases, effectively speaking the language of the board room. The numbers certainly speak loudly. For US art museums, changing demographics illustrate the need to attract more diverse audiences – for the sake of attendance numbers alone. In 2008, in sharp contrast to national demographics, 78.9% of museum visitors identified as non-Hispanic white.²⁰ Lack of diversity in museum visitor traffic reflects the lack of representation in

¹⁷ "Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums," American Association of Museums (2010): 12.

¹⁸ Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David Armstrong, *Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018): 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums*: 12.

permanent collections, exhibits and programming. And research establishes a clear correlation between audience attendance and permanent and exhibition artist make-up – when museums increase the diversity of their exhibits and collections, they see an uptick in the diversity of audience traffic, followed by donors.

Museums that fail to diversify risk the ire of public opinion, sliding into irrelevance, or both. And in the same way the money of influential donors impacts strategic direction, so does attendance volume, and corresponding ticket and merchandise income of an interested, or dis-interested, public. With 85% of museum permanent collections coming from white artists, but only 76% of the US population reporting as white, museums fail to represent multiple races with significant, and growing, populations. Much like the under-representation and exclusion of women artists, museums systematically overlook artists of color, including Black artists, Latinx artists, and artists from Indigenous cultures. As such, many cultures equate art museums with white culture, as the default.²¹ In 2018, artwork by Black artists made up a mere 1.2% of American museum permanent collections.²² Latinx artists face a similar reality. While Latinx represent the third fastest growing demographic in the US,²³ Latinx artists still lag prominently from US museum permanent collections.²⁴ US museums also largely ignore the perspectives of Indigenous People, a demographic not even granted its own category in the 2018 American Association of Museum Directors' study

²¹ Bridget Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 1.

²² Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 8.

²³ Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David Armstrong, *Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060* (Washington D.C.: United States Census Bureau, 2018): 4-5.

²⁴ Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

analyzing the diversity of US museums' permanent collections. Intersectional groups, such as women of color, face the greatest challenge with museum representation. For example, Black women artists comprise less than 1% of the permanent collections of American museums.²⁵ Clearly, the absence of these artists – regardless of the category – from museums does not result from their failure to exist in the US population.

Take women as an example. In 2012, the Guerrilla Girls updated their 1989 poster posing the question: Do women have to be naked to get into the Met? In short, the answer remains, yes. When the Guerrilla Girls initially surveyed the number of women artists among the Met's Modern Art collection, they reported finding 5%.²⁶ When they updated their survey in 2012, the number had dropped to 4%.²⁷ By 2018, when the American Association of Museum Directors surveyed the Met's entire permanent collection, female artists represented 7.3% of the collection.²⁸ Throughout that entire period, the US census reported that women accounted for slightly more than half of the US population. While the Met has made strides in increasing representation of female artists, the group remains woefully under-represented, as a proportion to the country's population.²⁹

Of course, as Linda Nochlin noted in her infamous 1971 article, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, the mere existence of any specific population within the US population doesn't necessarily mean the group includes proportional numbers of

²⁵Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 9.

²⁶ "Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?" *The Tate*, Accessed March 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>

²⁷ "Guerrilla Girls: Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?," 2012," *Whitney Museum of American Art*. <https://whitney.org/collection/works/46999>

²⁸ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 8.

²⁹ This is the lowest percentage of all museums surveyed for the study.

artists, much less museum grade talents.³⁰ However, over the last forty years, growing demands from activists and stakeholders have increased pressure on museums throughout the US to diversify their permanent collections, exhibitions and programming, by including artists representative of the population and embracing diverse audiences, representative of society at large. The calls for diversification come from internal and external stakeholders, including museum staff and boards, and broader, public demands for museums to support ongoing social change by modernizing museum collections, business practices, and visitor experiences to align to contemporary social norms, including gender, racial, and class equality. After attempting a wide range of diversification strategies – from quick tactical fixes to broad strategic initiatives – with varying outcomes, museums continue struggling to answer calls for diversification.

This paper reviews a spectrum of known approaches – from public relations stunts, to temporary exhibitions and programming, to the creation of new curatorial lines, to broad-sweeping mission changes – undertaken by museums across the US intent upon increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion. I contend that certain conditions are necessary for successful systematic reimagining of museums' role within the current socio-political climate: Specifically, successful changemakers must first align board and museum staff to a shared mission, and then commit long-term financial resources to fulfilling that mission. Through close considerations of tactics employed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Virginia

³⁰ Linda Nochlin, "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" ARTnews (2015). Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>

Museum of Fine Arts, I will argue that the most significant progress occurs where board priorities align to community demographics.

Chapter 1 Institutional Identity: The Modern Role of the U.S. Art Museum

A deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary role of museums within society provides a valuable foundation for addressing the issues of diversification in museum collections and exhibitions. Key questions to understand include: What is the societal role of museums? Who do United States museums serve? What calls for change exist within the art world?

Scholars and museum organizations, such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and American Alliance of Museums (AAM), agree that, at their core, art museums exist to preserve and study cultural heritage and publicly exhibit both the physical and abstract aspects of cultural heritage.³¹ In this way, museums provide an environment that exposes visitors to varying perspectives, often different from one's own, and foster learning about the human experience.³² The scope of individual museum missions vary – some focus on a specific period or genre, while others encompass the full canon. As such, each museum measures its success according to the appropriate yardstick for its own area of focus or mission. Regardless of its area of focus, relative to the scope of their mission most museums face challenges with diversification, dating back to the earliest days of museums.

The first museums emerged in Europe, dating to France in 1793, under the revolutionary government, which created The Louvre, the world's first art museum, in the modern sense of the word.³³ The United States' most ambitious art museums

³¹ Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (University of California Press, 2008), 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

³³ Sherman Lee and Edward Henning, "Works of Art, Ideas of Art, and Museums of Art," in *On Understanding Art Museums*, ed. Sherman Lee (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 5.

emerged almost a century later, in the wake of the United States' Civil War.³⁴ Unlike the heavy government support museums received in Europe, the US government took a laissez-faire approach to cultural pursuits, including the country's first museums.³⁵ Instead of emerging as public institutions, US museums developed from the interest – and investment -- of private citizens.³⁶

Free from government involvement, from their very founding, United States art museums emerged as an extension of the east coast social hierarchy. During Reconstruction, a period of national cultural crisis and economic upheaval, citizens of traditionally wealthier social classes, and others attempting to penetrate their social circles with newfound wealth, sought ways to organize their social ranks in the newly reunited country.³⁷ Founding art museums, operas, playhouses and charitable organizations afforded these groups opportunities to distinguish those who could afford to enjoy high art as superior to those who could not.³⁸ The members of the upper class, who created and maintained the new arts institutions, staked a claim that their work promoted universal social good, ignoring the class divides their work asserted in parallel.³⁹ Examining the financial and operational structures of museums today, little has changed with most museums nearly wholly dependent on the largess of a few wealthy donors and patronized by an elite class of regular visitors.

³⁴ Alan Wallach, "A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States," in *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum* ed. Katarzyna Murawaska-Muthesius and Piotr Piotowski (Routledge, 2017): 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Key aspects of the origins of US museums developed into long-term scholarship concerns. Whereas many European collections started with long-held “princely collections,” and expanded through a purposefully planned, carefully curated museum mission, some US museums emerged solely to provide learning opportunities and cultural entertainment for a society geographically isolated from established European museums, often resulting in haphazard collections.⁴⁰ The patronage model dates to the very origins of the US museum model and remains pervasive today, impacting the mission of individual museums, their curatorial and programming focus, and even financial health, all heavily influenced, if not dictated by boards and influential donors.⁴¹

Understanding who created US museums – wealthy donors – and for whom – wealthy patrons – leads to the question how museums have evolved, both in terms of their financial support and their audience. Outside of the Smithsonian, even today, most museums derive the bulk of their financial support from a combination of donations and programming revenues, including activities such as ticketing.⁴² Unlike 19th century museums, contemporary US museums aim to serve “society”, as a whole, not as a class. And, by that definition, nearly every museum is failing.

The failure to transform museum attendance parallels the failure to transform museum permanent collections, as cited by the Guerrilla Girls. With the collections not mapping to the cultural makeup of the country, and the visitor demographics not aligning to the country’s demographic, museums increasingly recognize their failure in

⁴⁰ Joshua Taylor, "The Art Museum in the United States," in *On Understanding Art Museums*, ed. Sherman Lee (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴² Martina Tanga, “Let’s Imagine a New Museum Structure,” *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021): 11-12.

achieving their responsibility, as set forth by ICOM, AAM, and their own missions. The failure transcends the definition of public versus private – it’s a failure to succeed in meeting the very definition of a museum. In the face of failing the mission emerges a fundamental tension between the public, artists, curators, administrators, and museum boards and donors, which Victoria Alexander highlights in the correlation between museum donors, those donors’ preferences, and the exhibitions museums stage.⁴³ Much-needed private funding sources consist largely of wealthy, white people whose influence results in collections, exhibits and programming that continues to appeal to a narrow demographic.⁴⁴

First highlighted by the Guerrilla Girls, the art world agrees museums need to work on diversity, with the AAM joining the call in their 1992 report, *Excellence and Equity*, now considered a landmark siren call on the need for increased diversity in museum spaces.⁴⁵ Despite devoting six of the report’s ten recommendations to diversity,⁴⁶ to date, museums demonstrate little progress.⁴⁷ Two years later, in 1994, the Smithsonian released a report on the severe lack of Latinx representation in its museums, with a call to increase Latinx representation in museum administration and programming focused on the Latinx experience.⁴⁸ In 2018, the American Alliance of Museums released its report providing five key insights from a working group on

⁴³ Victoria Alexander. *Museums and Money*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996): 63.

⁴⁴ Yuha Jung, “Diversity Matters: Theoretical Understanding of and Suggestions for the Current Fundraising Practices of Nonprofit Art Museums,” *The Journal of Arts Management* 45 (2015): 258.

⁴⁵ Lisa Sasaki, “It’s Time to Stop and Ask “Why?”” in *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums*, ed. Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Laura L. Lott (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019): 69.

⁴⁶ “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums,” *The American Association of Museums*, 1992: 8.

⁴⁷ Lisa Sasaki, “It’s Time to Stop and Ask “Why?”” 69.

⁴⁸ Raúl, Yzaguirre, “Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and US Latinos, Report of the Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues,” *The Smithsonian Institution*, 1994.

diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. Time and again, report after report, the industry calls for systematic, long-term, authentic change in museums.⁴⁹ But the stacks of reports do not seem to result in change. With little meaningful progress to report, museum professionals and scholars, representing a wide range of institutions – from the small, local museums, to large, academic settings – continue amassing research, reports and essays detailing the necessity for increased diversity in all aspects of the museum world.

Alice Anderson, manager of audience research and impact at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and Michelle Mileham, the director of education at the Tracy Aviary, research museums' failure to open doors to diverse audiences. The authors suggest museums must devise techniques for providing staff and visitors with different perspectives.⁵⁰ The authors recommend museum professionals examine their own experiences and potential biases and that institutions evaluate their current state using the MASS Action resources to triage the steps for meaningful organizational change.⁵¹ These resources include a self-assessment for museum staff to determine the current state of equity in the institution,⁵² and a toolkit with an outline of the theory behind

⁴⁹ "Facing Change: Insights from the American Alliance of Museums' Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group," American Alliance of Museums, 2018.

⁵⁰ Alice Anderson and Michelle Mileham, "Welcome to the Museum: Reflecting on Representation and Inclusion in Museum Evaluation," *Curator* 63, no. 4 (2020): 597.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 602.

⁵² MASS Action Museum As Site for Social Action: Pre-work: Preparing for the Journey (MASS Action: 2017):

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58fa685dff7c50f78be5f2b2/t/59dcdcfb017db28a6c9d5ced/1507646717898/MASS+Action+Readiness+Assessment_Oct17+%281%29.pdf

building equity in museum spaces and worksheets to guide museum decision makers in the development of equity in their institution.⁵³

Gretchen Jennings, museum consultant, and Joanne Jones-Rizzi, director of community engagement at the Science Museum of Minnesota, explore the impact of white privilege on museums and the museum experience. Their work examines the missing diversity factors in museums and practical approaches for museums to undertake transformation.⁵⁴ The authors outline three key missing elements to museum diversification, including focusing too much on trying to change others instead of ourselves, leadership systems that do not consistently promote inclusivity, and a lack of truly diverse leadership.⁵⁵ The authors argue that diverse hiring results in systematic changes – that is, rather than expecting diverse hires to adapt to existing systems and business processes, new hires should inform and influence change in institutional practices to promote equity and inclusion.⁵⁶

Arts education scholar Antonio Cuyler explores the specific areas the American Alliance museums fell short in their pursuit of increased diversity.⁵⁷ Cuyler identified three primary areas museums should improve to progress diversity initiatives:

1. The AAM Core standards (museum accreditation),
2. Board makeup, and
3. Museum staff.⁵⁸

⁵³ Toolkit (MASS Action):

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58fa685dff7c50f78be5f2b2/t/59dcdd27e5dd5b5a1b51d9d8/1507646780650/TOOLKIT_10_2017.pdf

⁵⁴ Gretchen Jennings and Joanne Jones-Rizzi, "Museums, White Privilege, and Diversity: A Systematic Perspective," *Dimensions* (2017): 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁷ Antonio Cuyler, "Looking Beyond What We've Done Before: Minding Potential Blind Spots in Diversifying United States Museums," *The International Journal of the Museum* 14, no. 4 (2020): 39.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

Cuyler's essay reinforces the importance of continuing research and investment in museum diversification and positions the AAM as a driving force for modernizing United States museums⁵⁹ His research results in practical recommendations intended to enable the AAM and its affiliate museums to make meaningful progress in increasing diversity, ultimately required to achieve museums' missions and serve their audiences. Cuyler aligns his recommendations to the three blind spots currently vexing museum diversity initiatives, recommending that museum leadership amend the AAM Core Standards to include a clause requiring member institutions to proactively address diversity and inclusion, incentivize museums to diversify their boards, and leverage conferences to reinforce the importance of diversity and inclusion in museum spaces.⁶⁰ For scholars like Cuyler, the point of implementing changes to museum practices is to yield changes in the museum experience.

Another prominent museum consultant, Elaine Gurian, argues that only by examining, and then altering their own unwritten rules, particularly for interaction with museum visitors, can museums impart significant changes.⁶¹ Gurian identifies a misconception in the notion of civility in museums. She argues that museums' long-accepted behavioral and conduct standards, such as expecting gallery spaces to be quiet and distraction free, create an unwelcome environment to minority groups.⁶² Gurian connects these accepted museum staff mores to museum origins – when the manners of the elite class, almost exclusively the supporters and visitors to early museums, became the norm, to the exclusion of other social classes, essentially

⁵⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 44.

⁶¹ Elaine Gurian, "Intentional Civility," *The Thoughtful Museum* 57, no. 4 (2014): 473.

⁶² Ibid., 476-477.

establishing museums as aspirational, or even off-limits, spaces.⁶³ By propagating bygone behavioral expectations, based solely on arbitrary traditions, museums reinforce outdated social structures that exclude most elements of today's democratic, open society – simply by making younger generations, other classes and non-white races feel unwelcome.⁶⁴ Gurian's argument establishes the importance of visitor experience as vital to promoting diversity in museum spaces.

The notion of creating an environment that welcomes audiences from a wide range of constituencies gained further traction in 2015, when a group of museum professionals and consultants, including Gretchen Jennings, met following the AAM Conference in Atlanta to collaborate on shared frustrations.⁶⁵ This group, calling themselves The Empathetic Museum, asserts that museums should function with a focus on *institutional empathy*.⁶⁶ The Empathetic Museum identified five characteristics of Empathetic Practice and recommended museums consciously develop the characteristics:

1. "Civic Vision" -- the role that decision makers see their institution playing in the community.⁶⁷
2. "Institutional Body Language" -- the messages communicated to visitors through the unwritten and unspoken aspects of an institution.⁶⁸
3. "Community Resonance" -- an institution's understanding of the community it serves, including demographics, needs, and values.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ibid., 477.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Gretchen Jennings, Jim Cullen, Janeen Bryant, Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell, Stacy Mann, Charlotte Hove, and Nayeli Zepeda, "The Empathetic Museum: A New Institutional Identity," *Curator* 62, no. 4 (2019): 507.

⁶⁶ "the qualities of the 21st century museum are impossible without an inner core of institutional empathy," Ibid., 505.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 510.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 511.

4. “Timeliness and Sustainability” -- the ability of an institution to respond to events that impact its community in a reasonable timeframe.⁷⁰
5. “Performance Measures” -- the metrics by which an institution measures its progress.⁷¹

With the accompanying Empathetic Museum Maturity Model, the group provides museums a tool to help museums assess their compliance with the empathetic museum model and measure their progress towards improving visitor experience.⁷²

Art experts agree that imparting change requires more than adopting mission statements and modeling emerging business practices for diversity and inclusion. Without introducing new team members and altering the institutional organizational design, staid institutions face an uphill battle in making lasting change. Martina Tanga, curator and independent art historian, proposes an alternative museum staffing model that solves for the needs of the modern museum. Prompted by the social justice movements of 2020, including Black Lives Matter (BLM), Tanga asserts that museums benefit from less traditional, non-hierarchical organizational models, composed of teams empowered with decision making authority relative to the scope of their work.⁷³ Tanga even argues for integrating museum boards with the museum staff.⁷⁴ As such, the two groups are leveled to a single plane and aligned to common strategic objectives.⁷⁵ Tanga’s structure more closely aligns operations and leadership, reducing points of friction.⁷⁶ Her work provides an important research consideration for resolving the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 512-513.

⁷³ Martina Tanga, “Let’s Imagine a New Museum Structure,” *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021): 1 and 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

common mis-alignment between museum boards and staff that impedes achieving the museum mission, particularly regarding collection and exhibition diversification.

As the research indicates, US museums continue grappling with diversity issues – both in their collections and in their audiences. With counter-culture groups, like the Guerrilla Girls, initially highlighting the gaps in permanent collections and exhibits more than forty years ago, museums can no longer call the problem novel or radical. Even with museum organizations, including the AAM and Smithsonian, making calls to address the shortcomings starting in the 1990s, and the mounting related scholarship, monitoring groups report little change, forcing the need for further examination of roadblocks to progress.

Of course, museum professionals act at the behest of museum boards – and observers report a gap between what museum professionals call for and what their boards support.⁷⁷ Boards, typically composed of business-minded individuals, often bring a worldview that differs from the museum operational staff, and by extension, they prioritize operational imperatives by that perspective.⁷⁸ While curators may prioritize increasing the diversity of museum collections and exhibits as important, even imperative to the museum's relevance or mission, the individuals with decision making authority – and financial clout – need to agree.

Many scholars cite the impact of donor influence on museum programming. David Yermack, a professor of Finance specializing in the study of donor governance,⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

⁷⁹ Yermack defines donor governance as, “when contributors to nonprofit firms place restrictions on their gifts to limit the discretion of managers,” David Yermack, *Donor governance and financial management in prominent US art museums*, (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015), 215.

examines the relationship between museum fundraising programs, financial stability, and implications of increasing donor governance in US museums.⁸⁰ Yermack finds a correlation between donor restrictions and programming.⁸¹ Specifically, Yermack concludes that donations influence, limiting the flexibility of museum management, often shifting power from museum curators to museum boards.⁸² He also finds an inverse relation between restricted gifts and profit margins – as restricted gifts increase, museum profit margins decline, hurting museums' bottom lines.⁸³

Likewise, Victoria Alexander examines how the relationship between United States museums and their donors impacts exhibitions staged by large museums.⁸⁴ Alexander identifies three phases of museum financial development, marked by periods of shift in donor support.⁸⁵ The philanthropy phase, from 1960-1966, describes a period where museum funding came primarily from individual philanthropists with a noted lack of institutional funding.⁸⁶ The transition phase, from 1968 to 1972, saw a steady increase in institutional funding.⁸⁷ Finally, the funding phase, from 1974 to 1986, defines the period where institutional funding became a primary chunk of museum funds.⁸⁸

Alexander's work recognizes the tension between the various personnel roles in museum settings – e.g., donors, directors and curators – and addresses the potential conflict between the functions.⁸⁹ She concludes that this tension arises from the groups'

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 228.

⁸² Ibid., 232.

⁸³ Ibid., 234.

⁸⁴ Victoria Alexander. *Museums and Money*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 16.

opposing understandings of the museum's fundamental purpose – the business perspective versus the scholarly perspective.⁹⁰ Although published in 1996, with the art world slowly evolving since, the monograph provides relevant insight and context into the world of the United States museum as an institution. The tension Alexander describes between museum staff and donors raises important lingering questions as to where decision-making authority resides in contemporary museums, and what changes need to occur to enable diversification and continued relevance.

Kevin Mulcahy, a professor of political science, also writes about the impact of donors on museum agendas. Mulcahy asserts that the United States' tax policy underpins the country's patronage system – with tax deductions and estate management driving decision making.⁹¹ He cautions museums against engaging in corporate sponsorship, fearing that allocations from corporate advertising budgets obligate museums to a quid pro quo relationship, resulting in corporate or executive influence on sponsored exhibition.⁹² Mulcahy's work provides valuable foundational understanding of the organizational tension inherent when financial and creative decision-making inter-mingle.

To resolve some of the challenges raised by Mulcahy, other museum studies scholars, including Yuha Jung, research the importance of and approaches to diversifying museum donor pools. Jung asserts, "this growing population has not been active participants of mainstream philanthropy, not because they do not have the traditions of giving, which they do, but because they have been largely ignored by

⁹⁰ Ibid., 124-125.

⁹¹ Kevin Mulcahy, "Earned Income and American Museums: The Perils of Privatization," *Culture and Local Governance* 6, no. 2 (2020): 91.

⁹² Ibid., 98.

mainstream nonprofits and their fundraising professionals.” Jung’s work encourages museums to form relationships with minority communities and change museum fundraising to make it more inclusive.⁹³ Based in *The Theory of the Commons and the Social Obligation Theory of Inclusion*, her work advocates for a relationship-based fundraising approach, whereby institutions establish two-way relationships between their communities.⁹⁴ In building these relationships, Jung recommends museums diversify their boards and fundraising staff, understand the differences in donation practices for minority communities, and employ alternative fundraising techniques that resonate with the communities served.⁹⁵ Jung anticipates successful development to yield an increase both in the diversity of donors and visitors.⁹⁶

Diversifying collections relies not only on revenue and contributions, including financial and artwork, but on deliberate and responsible deaccessioning programs, through which curators permanently remove pieces from a museum’s collection, making room for acquiring works that improve the diversity of the collection. Due to the controversial nature and long-term repercussions of deaccessioning, museums approach the practice with care. Legal scholar Sara Tam writes about how deaccessioning policies impact the relationship between museums and the public, specifically the public trust.⁹⁷ Tam argues that museums understand their institutional mission, obligations to society, and have the requisite training to assess their

⁹³ Yuha Jung, “Diversity Matters: Theoretical Understanding of and Suggestions for the Current Fundraising Practices of Nonprofit Art Museums,” *The Journal of Arts Management* 45 (2015): 255.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁹⁷ Sara, Tam, “In Museums We Trust: Analyzing the Mission of Museums, Deaccessioning Policies, and the Public Trust,” Fordham University of Law, 2007.

collections, so should be empowered to make decisions independently regarding deaccessioning.⁹⁸ She asserts that regulatory bodies, including the AAM and the AAMD, overstep in implementing strict deaccessioning regulations that fail to recognize museum missions that commit to display art for the public.⁹⁹ Stricter aspects of these policies restrict museum deaccessioning to specific cases, and outside of limited exceptions during the pandemic, forbid it in cases to cover routine operating expenses, even if such a sale might be for the public good.¹⁰⁰ Tam argues that when museums close their doors due to operating losses, the public loses a valuable cultural asset.¹⁰¹ Alternatively, deaccessioning select pieces could help the same museum further its reach and its mission.¹⁰² Tam concludes that the public trust relies upon reasonable, practical and enforceable deaccessioning policies to ensure sustained economic health for museums.¹⁰³

Imparting lasting change within established museums requires strategic leadership and practical tactical advice. The plethora of research addressing varying, inter-related aspects of the importance of and challenges facing museums in increasing diversification and inclusion speaks to the complexity of facing museum boards, administrators and curators on topics including: legacy museum traditions, museums' mission, attendance data and demographic trends, visitor experience, institutional structures and decision-making protocols, financial structures, and including donor diversity. With a rich field of research emerging, complete with actionable

⁹⁸ Ibid., 889.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 895.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 897.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 901.

recommendations, museums find themselves better equipped to serve their mission to protect and present cultural heritage across all demographics, and ultimately, better serve their contemporary constituent audiences.

Chapter 2: Who Holds the Power? Organizational Structure and J.P. Morgan at the Met

In 1993, Fred Wilson created *Mining the Museum*, an exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society that questioned the traditional narratives perpetuated by museums through their permanent collections.¹⁰⁴ *Mining the Museum* solely used objects from the Maryland Historical Society's permanent collection to create vignettes that call out the inaccurate depictions of history displayed by museums and discrepancy between the museum's permanent collection and mission to preserve the culture of Maryland.¹⁰⁵ For instance, the first collection of objects in the exhibition (fig. ii) displayed three pedestals on either side of the Truth Trophy, a 1913 award given for authentic marketing. The three pedestals to the right of the trophy held busts of Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson. The three pedestals to the left remained empty with labels reading Benjamin Benneker, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass, the names of important African American figures from Maryland.¹⁰⁶ This collection points out that the museum possessed statues of three white historical figures who had little to do with Maryland, while neglecting the important African American figures who left important marks in the history of Maryland.¹⁰⁷ Wilson's exhibition was early to point out the disparity between museum's permanent collections and their institutional missions.

The responsibility for implementing institutional change falls to a combination of museum personnel, each of whom plays a distinct but interrelated role in the

¹⁰⁴ Noralee Frankel, "Exhibit Reviews," *The Public Historian* 15, no. 3 (1993): 105.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 106.

organization's functioning (Chart 1). Typically, a museum director, sometimes with a Chief Financial Officer, oversees the institution's overall operations and budgets. Depending on the size of the museum, key museum departments include: Curation, responsible for building and refining the museum's collections, Education, with a focus on programming to share knowledge about the museum's collections and exhibits, Development, accountable for fundraising activities, such as capital campaigns and grant writing, to support museum initiatives, and Operations, which manages the physical museum facility, including visitor-facing employees, private events, and retail outlets. Each of these organizational functions plays an important role in a museum's diversification efforts. Curators drive the evolution of the permanent collection and exhibitions, and work with Education to deliver programming that appeals to diverse audiences. Development's reach must extend into a broad donor base, using fundraising techniques suited to each group. And, operations ultimately determines the museum visit experience, and how it appeals to target audiences. Each department head ensures their functional area of the museum operates well independently, and then coordinates with their peers, and the museum's director, acting as a leadership team to ensure a cohesive, integrated audience experience.



Chart 1

Most United States museums function as private non-profits, classified as 501(c)3 organizations, under the federal tax code, meaning each institution raises its own funding.¹⁰⁸ As private organizations, these museums operate according to established bylaws, typically led by a board.¹⁰⁹ As fiduciary stewards of the institutions, museum boards act as custodians of the organization's best interests.¹¹⁰ In addition to ensuring the institution's financial health, strong boards safeguard the museum's brand, ensuring the museum's activities align to the organization's long-term best interests.¹¹¹ As such, any effort at inclusion starts with the Board viewing the program as vital to the museum's long-term health – and even survival. Formally, individual board members hold no authority over the museum, with decisions deriving from votes taken by the board, as established by the board's bylaws.¹¹² Day-to-day operational decisions fall to the museum director, appointed by the board.¹¹³

The successful museum director bridges communication between the museum operational leadership and the museum's board, to whom the director reports.¹¹⁴ The museum director typically creates proposals, such as the operating budget, which the board considers and approves.¹¹⁵ In presenting proposals and operational updates, the museum director heavily influences the board's decision making, particularly regarding strategic direction.¹¹⁶ That said, boards ultimately influence museum operations through

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Schlatter, *Museum Careers* (California: Left Coast Press Inc., 2008), 20.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹¹ BoardSource, *Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report* (Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2017): 24.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Schlatter, *Museum Careers*: 52.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

their decisions, such as specific points included in strategic plans, and in acceptance of financial gifts and art, which donors sometimes tie to specific covenants.¹¹⁷ When board or donor interests diverge from those of a museum's operational leadership, or the community the museum supports, conflict arises, such as straining the institution's ability to invest in collection and programming diversification.¹¹⁸

Chart 1 illustrates the traditional "top-down" organizational model adopted by most United States non-profit museums, where strategic direction and funding decisions flow from the board, at the organization's top, down to the operational experts who implement board vision on a day-to-basis.¹¹⁹ A 2017 American Alliance of Museums' study found that white people make up 89.3% of museum boards.¹²⁰ Nearly half (46%) of museum boards do not include any non-white board members.¹²¹ Even within the operational ranks, 93% of museum directors identify as white.¹²² As shown in Table 2, the over-abundance of white top decision makers from white communities, and dramatic under-representation of non-white communities on museum boards and in museum leadership positions not only fails to reflect the United States' demographics, or even the demographics of the United States' workforce, but impedes the institutional understanding and prioritization of diversification initiatives.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Schlatter, *Museum Careers*: 52.

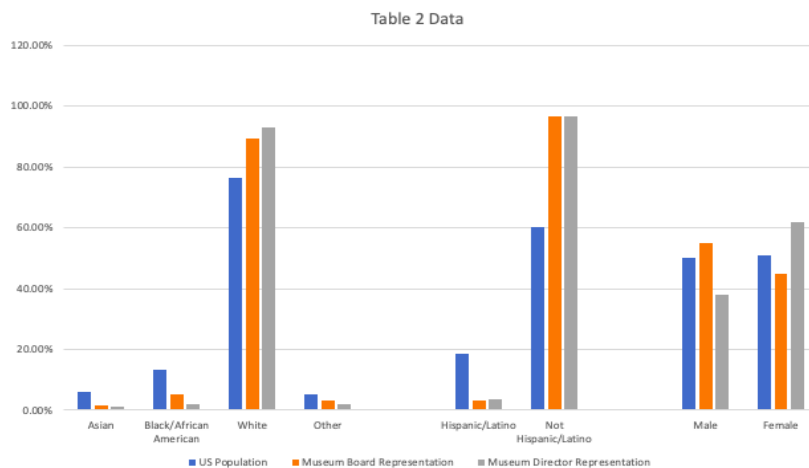
¹¹⁹ Martina Tanga, "Let's Imagine a New Museum Staff Structure," *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021): 3.

¹²⁰ BoardSource, *Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report* (Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2017): 5.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 12.

Table 2



Making time to address the looming demographic changes falls to museum directors and boards; however, museum directors report that boards spend only 32% of board meeting time on future, strategic, or generative work.¹²³ Boards devote the remaining two-thirds of their meeting time to operational issues, such as finances and board business.¹²⁴ A 2017 American Alliance of Museums report found that, “museum directors and board chairs believe that board diversity and inclusion are important to advance their missions but have failed to prioritize action steps to achieve it.”¹²⁵ As shown in the AAM report, museum boards prioritize operational tasks and financial oversight over longer-term initiatives, such diversity and inclusion projects, including permanent collection needs. With 67% of museum board meetings running less than two hours, and less than 32% of meeting time devoted to strategy (over operations), trustees simply do not spend adequate time on long-term concerns.¹²⁶ The balance of focus leaves inadequate time for deep-dives into collection short-falls, such as needs to

¹²³ BoardSource, *Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report*. 20.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

improve diversity in permanent collections, audience analysis, including comparisons to local demographics, or re-imagining the audience experience to appeal to evolving audiences. As such, these critical issues, all components to expanding diversification and inclusivity, fall to the museum administrative staff to address on a tactical level, making what progress they can without top-down support.

With calls for change and increased diversity pouring in from innumerable sources – arts scholars, industry organizations, museum administrators, curators, artists, activists, social movements, audiences and even shifting national demographics – the failure of boards to drive measurable change amounts to a dereliction of their leadership responsibility. Even public museums, ostensibly free from the oversight of a private board and clearly accountable to the full breadth of the United States' public, failures to diversify abound. Only two years after the 1992 American Association of Museums report, *Excellence and Equity*, the Smithsonian Institution reported a severe lack of Latinx representation in all aspects of its own organization.¹²⁷

For example, Atlanta, Georgia's High Museum of Art ("the High") tripled its non-white audience, from 15% to 45%, between 2015 and 2017, by increasing the frequency of exhibitions featuring Black artists and investing in adding work by Black artists to the museum's permanent collection.¹²⁸ Rand Suffolk, director of the High, cites the shift in the High's exhibition content as a main driver in increasing visitors and the diversity of visitor demographics.¹²⁹ In 2017, five of the museum's fifteen shows featured Black

¹²⁷ Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos* (Washington D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution, 1994): 2.

¹²⁸ Julia Halperin, "How the High Museum in Atlanta Tripled its Nonwhite Audience in Two Years," *artnet* (2017).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

artists.¹³⁰ The High featured pieces from its permanent collection in a 2017 show entitled *Cross Country: the Power of Place in American Art, 1915-1950*, which highlighted how the museum prioritized permanent collection investments in work by African American artists, enabling the High's curators to build a collection boasting the highest representation of African American artists of any museum in the United States.¹³¹ The permanent collection investment and increased exhibitions focusing on Black artists aligns to the population of Georgia, resulting in dramatic upticks in The High's visitor traffic and support. This acquisition included 11 Gee's Bend Quilts (fig. iii), Thornton Dial's largest painting, *Crossing Waters* (fig. iv), and Eldren Bailey's *Pyramid* (fig. v).¹³² The High's work reflects its understanding of the essential purpose of the contemporary museum – to preserve and protect the cultural heritage for education and future generations. And in doing so, the institution effectively engaged its audience, by reflecting the identities and experiences of its constituents on the walls of the High, and amongst its permanent collection. In doing so, the High, ensures the museum's social sustainability, future-proofing the institution even as demographics shift away from a non-Hispanic white majority.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Met provides an example of a museum slower to adapt to changing times. Not only is the Met one of the United States' oldest museums, but the institution also owns one of the most expansive permanent collections in the world. According to its charter, the Met's founders established the

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 8.

¹³² "High Museum of Art Acquired 54 Works of Art From Souls Grown Deep Foundation," Souls Grown Deep Foundation (April 25, 2017): <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/news/high-museum-art-acquires-54-works-art-souls-grown-deep-foundation>

museum in 1870 “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a museum and library of art or encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.”¹³³

As one of the United States’ earliest museums, the Met’s founders looked at Europe’s two leading museums as the basis for structuring their new organization – the South Kensington Model, in the United Kingdom, and The Louvre Model, from France.¹³⁴ Each museum model aimed to preserve its nation’s cultural artifacts.¹³⁵ Whereas the Louvre presented its impressive collection as a symbol of national pride, the South Kensington incorporated arts education into its programming.¹³⁶ The South Kensington put education at the core of its offering as the institution was born out of a government-sponsored design school to teach manufacturers design fundamentals and techniques.¹³⁷ Beginning with an objective to teach people about art and design, the South Kensington used its art exhibits as models for study.¹³⁸ As such, the South Kensington organized its art by medium, whereas The Louvre arranged its art by period.¹³⁹ By the 1880s, The Louvre Model prevailed in popularity throughout Europe, with the South Kensington Model gradually declining.¹⁴⁰ Initially, The Louvre inspired The Met’s founders, many of whom had spent time in Paris; however, in designing The

¹³³ The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Charter, Constitution, By-Laws, 1870

¹³⁴ Alan Wallach, "A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States," in *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum* ed. Katarzyna Murawaska-Muthesius and Piotr Piotowski (Routledge, 2017): 27.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³⁶ Kathleen Curran, *The Invention of the American Art Museum* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016): 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

Met's mission, the South Kensington Model appealed to their ambitions to promote the public good.¹⁴¹ Over time the founders realized that establishing The Met's reputation as a world-class museum required them to prioritize collecting above education, so they ultimately side-lined their educational aspirations as part of streamlining strategic focus.¹⁴²

Funding the ambitious project required The Met to raise capital funds. The Met's board of trustees sought contributions from New York City's elite, turning both to individuals with a passion for art and those with deep pockets.¹⁴³ From its founding in 1870 until 1967, The Met required a minimum donation of \$50,000 for donors to qualify as a prestigious "Benefactor of The Met".¹⁴⁴ Smaller contributions – such as \$5,000 to be named "a Fellow for Life" and \$1,000 to be called "a Fellow in Perpetuity" – appealed to higher numbers of smaller donors with less financial resources.¹⁴⁵ The Met founders set about their fundraising during a period of economic hardship – on the heels of the United States' Civil War – and despite their ambitions and efforts, The Met only managed to raise \$100,000 in its first year (just over \$2 million in today's dollars), a modest sum relative to the Board's goals.¹⁴⁶

By the end of the decade, in 1879, The Met's board appointed its first museum director, Luigi Palma di Censola.¹⁴⁷ Responsible for creating the museum's first three departments –painting, drawing, & prints; sculpture & antiquities; and casts &

¹⁴¹ Alan Wallach, "A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States:" 30.

¹⁴² Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980): 12.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴⁴ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Charter, Constitution, By-Laws* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1967): 5.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*: 8.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

reproductions – Censola significantly increased The Met’s holdings, by count.¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the quality of Censola’s acquisitions lagged what other museums added to their collections during the same period.¹⁴⁹ Although insiders raised concern about Censola’s shortcomings, including disorganization and poor restoration practices, the director refused to retire, impeding The Met’s maturation at an important stage of the institution’s development.¹⁵⁰ While Censola acquired what experts assessed as mediocre Cyprian objects, a major gift consisting of thousands of musical instruments that were not displayed until the 1940s, and gifts of valuable works by Van Dyck, Manet, and Vermeer, during the same period, other museums amassed vast collections of important art and antiquities.¹⁵¹ By the director’s death, in 1904, an important window for acquisitions had closed, leaving The Met at a competitive disadvantage.¹⁵²

J.P. Morgan’s appointment to the top ranks of The Met board in 1904 marks an important turning point in the museum’s history. Historians credit the businessman with shifting The Met from the South Kensington Model to The Louvre Model, focusing the museum’s limited resources on accumulating and preserving the highest quality of works.¹⁵³ Morgan leveraged his connections to stack The Met’s board with wealthy collectors who could stabilize the museum’s finances.¹⁵⁴ The capital influx allowed The Met to expand its permanent collection, across every existing field and department,¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 11.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 10 and 13.

¹⁵² Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁵³ Alan Wallach, "A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States:" 32.

¹⁵⁴ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 17.

¹⁵⁵ Louis Auchincloss, *J.P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, INC Publishers, 1990): 24.

and to open new departments dedicated to Egyptian, classical, and decorative arts.¹⁵⁶ Under Morgan's leadership, the museum focused on acquiring objects of the highest quality.¹⁵⁷ Morgan also took control of the museum staff, appointing Roger Fry as The Met's curator of paintings in 1905.¹⁵⁸ Tension quickly arose between Fry and Morgan due to differences in taste.¹⁵⁹ While Fry recommended acquiring works not yet in fashion, such those by the French Impressionists, Morgan proved closed minded, limiting the progress Fry made as curator.¹⁶⁰ Combined with his financial and social connections to the board, Morgan's feud with Fry quickly escalated to a board feud with the curator.¹⁶¹

While Morgan stands as an example of a board member exerting undue influence on curatorial decisions and museum operations, his contributions to The Met remain enormous. In addition to stabilizing the museum's foundation, narrowing its focusing, prioritizing collection excellence, and expanding the museum's scope, the Morgan family personally contributed to expanding The Met's permanent collection, when, in 1916, Morgan's son, J.P. Morgan Jr., donated 40% of Morgan's private collection to the museum.¹⁶² The Morgan family's 1916 donation included Raphael's Colonna altarpiece and an expansive collection of medieval works.¹⁶³ The following year, the Morgan family added another seven thousand objects to The Met permanent

¹⁵⁶ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Alan Wallach, "A Very Brief History of the Art Museum in the United States:" 32.

¹⁵⁸ Louis Auchincloss, *J.P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector*. 23.

¹⁵⁹ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 19.

¹⁶² Louis Auchincloss, *J.P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector*. 27.

¹⁶³ Jean Strouse, "JP Morgan Financier and Collector", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Winter 2020: 59.

collection, including artifacts from a variety of cultures including, “Assyrian, Egyptian, and classical antiquities; collections of Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic enamels and ivories; medieval and Renaissance metalwork, sculpture, jewelry, crystals, and amber; French pottery of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century; the Negroli helmet; a collection of snuffboxes and other small jeweled and ornamented caskets; several paintings and oriental works of art; and his father's watch collection.”¹⁶⁴

As a result, The Met created its decorative arts department to accommodate the Morgan donations, which remain the foundation of The Met’s impressive collection.¹⁶⁵ To date, the Morgan donation of medieval works ranks as one of The Met’s most valuable gifts in history.¹⁶⁶ For The Met, Morgan’s gift came at a critical time in the museum’s development, and the museum displayed all of the pieces together, in a dedicated wing, until 1943.¹⁶⁷ For decades, The Met’s collection disproportionately reflected the interests, and taste, of a single person: J.P. Morgan.¹⁶⁸ While the Morgan collection numbered thousands of pieces, it was not a comprehensive representation, even of medieval work.¹⁶⁹ And, as a patron of multiple museums, the entire collection did not even end up in The Met.¹⁷⁰ As such, the resulting exhibit only portrays a narrow perspective of art history.

Morgan’s legacy at The Met ensured the museum’s survival during its fledgling stage, not only with the gift of his service and business acumen, but with his financial

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 26.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Charles Molesworth, *The Capitalist and the Critic: J.P. Morgan, Roger Fry, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (University of Texas Press, 2016): 166.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

support and patronage in donating to the permanent collection. However, Morgan also imprinted an operational legacy on The Met, and the museums that look to The Met as the example for museum operations. Many of Morgan's practices directly contradict the best practices recommended by contemporary art scholars. Just as "the Morgan model" – a hands-on board director heavily involved in curatorial decision making – hindered Fry's ability to collect French Impressionists for The Met in the early 20th century,¹⁷¹ Yermack warns that contemporary donors might, consciously or unconsciously, influence curatorial decisions.¹⁷² Another aspect of "the Morgan model" – loading the board with wealthy friends – runs counter to Jung's advice for contemporary museums to diversify their boards and donor bases in the interest of maintaining relevance and expanding diverse audiences.¹⁷³ Even the Morgan family's generous donations to The Met, which resulted in an entire wing focused on the Morgan collection, support Alexander's warnings about donor influence on museum exhibitions and programming.¹⁷⁴ Ultimately, by recognizing the work of scholars like Macdonald, who contend that museums are products of the society, and time, in which they were created, museums, including The Met, can replace bygone practices, such as "the Morgan method" with best practices for board management that better serve their missions.¹⁷⁵

Even Morgan understood that creating a thriving museum required periodic operational change. When he joined the museum's board, Morgan championed The

¹⁷¹ Howard Hibbard, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 19.

¹⁷² David Yermack, *Donor governance and financial management in prominent US art museums*: 232.

¹⁷³ Yuha Jung, "Diversity Matters: Theoretical Understanding of and Suggestions for the Current Fundraising Practices of Nonprofit Art Museums:" 263.

¹⁷⁴ Victoria Alexander. *Museums and Money* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁵ George Macdonald, "Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society:" 160.

Met's shift from the South Kensington Model, ostensibly to narrow the institution's focus during a period of limited financial resources. While that change suited the museum's situation at the time, today, The Met boasts one of the world's richest museum endowments,¹⁷⁶ with a vast permanent collection, only 4% of which is publicly displayed.¹⁷⁷ While de-emphasizing the teaching aspect of the Met's original concept proved strategically wise during the early 20th century, the decision cut off the institution from an important programming option for attracting non-traditional audiences. Today, most United States museums consider education an important aspect of their programming, appealing to numerous valuable demographics, including families and young children, who represent a long-term constituency.

Yet, even as Morgan embraced operational changes, where tactically necessary to safeguard the museum's survival, the Met's leadership no longer keeps pace with changing times or adjusts its business practices to match its own evolution. In 1967, the Met doubled all three minimum contribution thresholds for donors seeking Benefactor status.¹⁷⁸ And, today, people seeking a board seat with The Met first must make a minimum contribution of ten million dollars.¹⁷⁹ The Met's contribution thresholds exclude all but the elite of the elite, propagating the museum's original financial traditions, and skewering efforts at driving diversity, such as those promoted by Jung.

¹⁷⁶ "Cultural Institutions in the U.S. ranked by size of endowments in 2011," Statista (2022):

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/258355/cultural-institutions-in-the-us-ranked-by-size-of-endowments/>

¹⁷⁷ Robin Pogrebin, "Clean House to Survive? Museums Confront Their Crowded Basements," *The New York Times* (2019): <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/10/arts/museum-art-quiz.html>

¹⁷⁸ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Charter, Constitution, By-Laws* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1967): 5.

¹⁷⁹ Robin Pogrebin, "Trustees Find Board Seats Are Still Luxury Items," *The New York Times* (2010). <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/03/arts/03center.html>

Even so, around the world, experts continue to hold up the Met as the quintessential United States museum, pointing to it as the ideal model for smaller museums with aspirational missions. Despite the acclaim, the Met holds one of the least representative collections of any United States museum, with 88.9% of the works in its permanent collection by white artists.¹⁸⁰ As for women artists, the Met reports the lowest representation of female artists of any of the US museums examined by the 2018 AAMD survey, at a mere 7.3%.¹⁸¹ Even looking beyond the Met's collection, the Met lacks representation in its leadership ranks. Throughout the museum's history, ten people have held the position of museum director – all men. Of the sixteen presidents of the Met, only one was a woman. Based on the Met's disappointing track record, the arts world needs to look elsewhere for models of the stewardship demanded by contemporary social forces. Even the Met's new leadership, board co-chairs Candace Beinecke and Tony James, appointed in January 2021, can learn valuable lessons from other institutions with more successful track records for diversification, in spite of having less vast resources than the Met.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums:" 8.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Candace Beinecke and Tony James Elected as Co-Chairs of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Board of Trustees, Succeeding Daniel Brodsky* (2020). <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2020/board-co-chair-announcement>

Chapter 3: The Smithsonian's Crawl to Latinx Institutional Representation

The 2018 AAMD report on the state of representation in United States museum permanent collections found that only 2.8% of the permanent collections analyzed represented Hispanic/Latinx artists.¹⁸³ As discussed in Chapter 1, this figure is sharply out of line with the United States' current demographics. The exclusion of these minority voices from museum spaces creates an inaccurate depiction of American art. Despite its significant participation in art production and activism in the United States, the Chicanx¹⁸⁴ community voice remains largely excluded from the traditional American art canon. Over time, the exclusion of Chicanx art from mainstream spaces has impacted and even altered the themes, mediums, and placement of the culture's art.¹⁸⁵ Recognizing a gap in its permanent collection and exhibitions, The Smithsonian Museum adopted a programmatic approach to increasing the representation of Latinx art throughout its spaces. This chapter examines the Smithsonian's slow journey to fulfill its commitment to increasing inclusion with a focus on Latinx representation in the museum's programming, starting with The Smithsonian's *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, which debuted in 2013, marking the beginning of the institution's demonstrated commitment to including Chicanx art in the wider American art narrative.

¹⁸³ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums," 8.

¹⁸⁴ The word Chicanx is a recent form of the word, one which suggests gender-based inclusion. The original form of the word was spelled simply as Chicano, and then later Chicana. *Printing the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, edited by E. Carmen Ramos (Washington DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum 2020): 21.

¹⁸⁵ Carmen Ramos, "Exhibition Talk: What is Latino about American Art?" October 25, 2013, Washington D.C., MPEG-4, 11:00-12:00.

The term Chicax derives from *Chicano*, an early twentieth century ethnic slur used to describe poor Mexican immigrants living in the United States.¹⁸⁶ During the 1960s, coinciding with the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, the Mexican-American community reclaimed the term, adapting it to describe any person identifying as Mexican-American.¹⁸⁷ The term later evolved to Chicax, in affirmation of all gender identities. In reclaiming an ethnic slur, the Chicax identity not only categorizes a people, but captures the long and painful history of discrimination against and exclusion of Mexican-American people throughout United States history. While ties for the Mexican-American and Chicax, population, historically run deepest in the United States, other Latin American, or Latinx, populations also now represent significant portions of the United States population.

Chicax art has been a leading force in civil rights movements since 1965, playing an important role in spreading information about protest agendas.¹⁸⁸ Posters and prints quickly emerged as a dominating art form due to their cost effectiveness.¹⁸⁹ Posters came out of different organizations including political action groups, art centers, and even from individual artists.¹⁹⁰ The resulting prints helped define not only the Chicax civil rights movement, but also the Chicax identity.¹⁹¹

Exploring Chicax art within the American art tradition requires a working understanding of the major events shaping the Mexican-American socio-political

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Terezita Romo, "Aesthetics of the Message: Chicana/o Posters, 1965-1987," in *Printing the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics*, edited by E. Carmen Ramos (Washington DC: The Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020): 71.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

experience – ranging from the US government’s broken land rights promises to displaced Mexican-Americans after the Mexican-American War, Mexican-American activism in the Civil Rights movement, leadership in the farm workers’ rights movement, and protests to improve inclusion in US public schools. With Chicax activists engaging across so many aspects of American life – from labor practices, to land rights, to education access – art and artists played a significant role engaging and empowering communities to join the Civil Rights movement.¹⁹²

In spite of prolific production during these periods, and even before, museums in the United States vastly under-represent the Chicax in the narrative of the country’s history, as reported in the 2018 AAMD report, which stated that only 2.8% of the permanent collections the analyzed US museums represents Hispanic and Latinx artists.¹⁹³ Two museums in the survey, both located in the western United States, hold higher proportions of Latinx art in their collections – The Denver Art Museum at 5.4% and the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles at 6.4%.¹⁹⁴ These areas also have a large Mexican-American population.¹⁹⁵ Accounting for the fact that the Chicax identity represents only one sub-group of the Latinx category captured in the AAMD report, the representation of Chicax artists in these spaces is likely a fraction of these already small, under-represented figures.

¹⁹² Ibid., 60.

¹⁹³ Chad Topaz, et al, “Diversity of Artists in major UNITED STATESMuseums,” 8.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁵ “Demographic and Economic Profiles of Hispanics by State and County, 2014,” *Pew Research Center* (2014): <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/states/>

Increasing the representation of Latinx art requires focus from the art community, not only through investment in permanent collections and exhibits, but also through increased research on the movement. Despite its cultural and historical significance, within United States art history, the study of Latinx art receives relatively little focus.¹⁹⁶ From 2002 to 2012, only thirteen Ph.D. candidates wrote dissertations on topics of Latinx art in the US. Only four of the papers considered Chicana art and artists.¹⁹⁷ The oversight in study risks continued neglect of Chicana artists, who also identify as American artists influenced by upbringing and experiences in the United States.¹⁹⁸ As recommended by Cuyler, diversifying staff, or at least diversifying staff interests, fosters successful museum diversification efforts.¹⁹⁹ Gaps in emerging scholarship, and qualified candidates pursuing Latinx and Chicana specialties, may impede institutions' readiness for diversifying research and programming.

That said, not all Chicana agree that Chicana art belongs in traditional art spaces, such as private collections, museums, and galleries. In a 1980 essay, "A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art," artists Malaquías Montoya and Leslie Salkowitz-Montoya assert that including Chicana art in traditional art spaces, like museums and galleries, fails to serve the original goals of the Chicana movement by

¹⁹⁶ Adriana Zavala, "Latin@ Art at the Intersection," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 40, no. 1 (2015): 125.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁹⁸ Carmen Ramos, "Exhibition Talk: What is Latino about American Art?" 11:00-12:00.

¹⁹⁹ Antonio Cuyler, "Looking Beyond What We've Done Before: Minding Potential Blind Spots in Diversifying United States Museums," *The International Journal of the Museum* 14, no. 4 (2020): 40-44.

removing it from its intended environment.²⁰⁰ Montoya and Salkwoitz-Montoya argue that by failing to make space for traditional works, museums and galleries forced Chicax artists to shift towards public art, such as muralism. As such, the Chicax art movement itself, including the formats, environments and materials, evolved in response to its exclusion from public spaces. Their rationale relies on contemporary Chicax artists persistently pushing back on what they perceive as a historically unjust system, rather than cooperating with the system, which they perceive as becoming complicit to validating the antiquated system.²⁰¹ The separatist ideology forces Chicax artists to choose between acceptance by their peers and gaining wider audiences, and even financial support for future work. The separatist movement also creates challenges for museums working to increase Chicax representation, for the benefit of Chicax cultural preservation and understanding.

Alternatively, art historian Shifra Goldman ponders whether the Chicax movement ever called for complete separatism and challenges its feasibility.²⁰² According to Goldman, by the 1980s, the Chicax movement demonstrated the self-awareness required to engage both internally, within the Chicax community, and externally, with supporters beyond the Chicax community.²⁰³ Goldman calls for

²⁰⁰ Malaquías Montoya and Lezlie Sakowitz-Montoya, "A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art." In *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jennifer González, Ondine Chavoya, Chon Noriega, and Terezita Romo, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 40.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁰² Shifra Goldman, "Response: Another Opinion on the State of Chicano Art," In *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jennifer González, Ondine Chavoya, Chon Noriega, and Terezita Romo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 46.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

institutional change at museums and galleries, not as enemies of the Chicana art movement.²⁰⁴ Her essay champions the cause for including Chicana art and artists in museums and galleries.²⁰⁵ By increasing representation of Chicana artists, and other minority groups, museums move towards a more complete narrative of American art, and better serve their audiences.

Understanding the importance of serving its entire audience, including representing the country's Chicana legacy, The Smithsonian Museums ("the Smithsonian"), undertook a lengthy effort to incorporate more Chicana art into its permanent collection and exhibitions. The Smithsonian represents an unusual museum model for the United States – the rare public museum.

The Smithsonian, actually an organization of nineteen museums, started after English scientist James Smithson died in 1829, leaving his estate to the United States government with instructions to create an organization for the, "increase and diffusion of knowledge."²⁰⁶ Upon approval from the United States Senate in 1846, the Smithsonian Institution formed as a group of museums, focused on various disciplines.²⁰⁷ It is worth noting that the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian opened in 1989²⁰⁸ and the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened in 2016.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ "Our History," *The Smithsonian Institution*: <https://www.si.edu/about/history>

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ "About the Museum," *National Museum of the American Indian*: <https://americanindian.si.edu/about>

²⁰⁹ "About the Museum," *National Museum of African American History and Culture*: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/about-museum>

In 1994, the Smithsonian released a report entitled “Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and United States Latinos” detailing the institution’s failure to represent the Latinx community throughout all aspects of their operations. The report acknowledged the organization’s lack of Latinx employees, gaps in museum spaces, and gaps in collections, exhibitions and programming dedicated to Latinx culture.²¹⁰ Along with their findings, the task force responsible for the report provided ten recommendations to the Smithsonian. The working group recommendations called for immediate action including, recruiting Latinx individuals to serve in roles across all aspects of the institution, dedicating a specific portion of the budget to Latinx initiatives, and adding Latinx contributions to the permanent collection of the Smithsonian.²¹¹ In spite of the scathing report and specific recommendations, in 2010, more than fifteen years passed before the museum appointed E. Carmen Ramos as its first curator of Latinx art. Ramos spent the next eleven years championing the cause of Latinx art at the nation’s largest and most prestigious public museum.

Ramos staged her first major exhibit at the Smithsonian with 2013’s *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* exhibition.²¹² *Our America* included 92 works of art by 72 Latinx artists.²¹³ Ramos also ensured the Smithsonian added many of the works to its permanent collection, demonstrating a long-term commitment to the

²¹⁰ The Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and United States Latinos* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1994): 2.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

²¹² Wayne Clough, “From the Castle,” *Smithsonian* 44, no. 6 (2013): 10.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

movement.²¹⁴ The exhibition included artists from many different Latinx backgrounds, including Chicanx artists. *Our America* proved a major turning point for The Smithsonian as a whole, relative to inclusion.

Ramos positioned *Our America* as an examination of the impact of Latinx art on the broader narrative of American art.²¹⁵ She highlights the absence of Latinx narratives from the art history of American art, when read through the lens of American Art collections.²¹⁶ Ramos acknowledges the transitional nature of Latinx art, but argues for the necessary inclusion of Latinx art as inherently American.²¹⁷ As such, mounting the exhibit at The Smithsonian's American Art Museum, the country's largest and most prominent public museum, and adding so many Latinx works to The Smithsonian's permanent collection sent a loud and clear message to the art world about the importance and relevance of Latinx art to the American art canon.

Despite the significant progress *Our America* demonstrated towards The Smithsonian's long-standing goals of increasing Latinx representations, critics panned the exhibition. Philip Kennicott of *The Washington Post* criticized the show for its lack of direction, asserting it attempted to include too many different identities.²¹⁸ Kennicott's hypothesis that Latinx art no longer represented a meaningful category sparked many

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Carmen Ramos, "Exhibition talk: What is Latino about American Art?" 12:27.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 11:00.

²¹⁷ Carmen Ramos, "What is Latino about American Art?" in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art*, ed. E Carmen Ramos (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2014): 34.

²¹⁸ Philip Kennicott, "Art review: 'Our America' at the Smithsonian," *Washington Post* (2013). https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/art-review-our-america-at-the-smithsonian/2013/10/25/77b08e82-3d90-11e3-b7ba-503fb5822c3e_story.html

debates. Alex Rivera, digital artist and filmmaker, challenged Kennicott, arguing that the absence of Latinx art from other shows excludes Latinx people from the American identity.²¹⁹

Yet Kennicott's criticism failed to understand the complexity of the Latinx identity, even the notion of dual identity, which several of the show's pieces addressed, such as people trapped between the cultures of Mexico and the United States, not accepted by either, marginalized by both. For instance, Mel Casas' *Humanscape 62* (fig. vi), one of the works The Smithsonian acquired for its permanent collection, brings together multiple American Southwest popular culture references to the color brown.²²⁰ The painting's top portion depicts a stack of chocolate brownies. Below the baked goods, stands a grouping of three human figures. To the far left, a stoic Native American man stands in profile. On the opposite side, on the far right, four women dressed in textiles face each other. Between the other figures, stands a young child dressed in a Girl Scout uniform. At the bottom, a green statue, a replica of the Frito Bandito, the former mascot of the Frito-Lay chip company features prominently, with a two-headed snake extending to either side.²²¹ The double headed snake resembles Quetzalcoatl, an ancient Mesoamerican creator god.²²² Casas juxtaposes images from the Mexican and American cultures illustrating the trivialization of Mexican-American culture within

²¹⁹ Alex River and Philip Kennicott, "Alex Rivera, Philip Kennicott Debate *Washington Post* Review of *Our America*," In *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jennifer González, Ondine Chavoya, Chon Noriega, and Terezita Romo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 430.

²²⁰ Carmen Ramos, "Melesio "Mel" Casas," in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art*, ed. E Carmen Ramos (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2014): 127.

²²¹ The Frito Bandito was not removed as the mascot of Frito-Lay until 1971. Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

American pop culture.²²³ The themes of Casas' work highlight how commonly United States society marginalizes the Mexican-American culture, treating the group as separate,²²⁴ the same dynamic replicated by the art world in failing to incorporate Chicana art, which the *Our America* show sought to remedy.

Beyond works addressing the Chicana identity, many works in *Our America* provided insight to the historical significance of the Chicano movement, such as the labor movement. Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad* (fig. vii) addresses the ongoing Chicano fight for farm workers' labor rights.²²⁵ Hernandez grew up in California's San Joaquin Valley,²²⁶ influenced by the nearby National Farm Workers 1965 strike.²²⁷ *Sun Mad* appropriates the Sun Maid raisin package design, replacing the main figure with a smiling skeleton. Beneath the primary image, Hernandez lists the chemicals commonly used to treat and fertilize the grapes used in Sun Maid products. The union fought for chemical safety, which posed a major threat to both farm workers and the surrounding community.²²⁸ Farm workers risk exposure to chemical toxins at work on a daily basis, and farm runoff exposed San Joaquin Valley residents to the chemicals through contaminated ground water supply.²²⁹ *Sun Mad* not only served as a protest poster, but

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Carmen Ramos, "Episode 1- Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art-Melesio Casas," YouTube. September 30, 2015. Video, 3:13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SK_aNp2FfFs&t=58s

²²⁵ Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, "Ester Hernandez," in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art*, ed. E Carmen Ramos (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2014): 197.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Carlos Jackson, *Chicana and Chicano Art*, 13.

²²⁸ Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, "Ester Hernandez," 197.

²²⁹ Ibid.

also became an important new type of pop art.²³⁰ The poster's inclusion in *Our America*, and addition to The Smithsonian's permanent collection, validates the Chicana experience and incorporates the contributions of the Chicana people to United States history.

The *Our America* exhibition also included the historically important land rights issues, dating back to the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. By including Delilah Montoya's photographs of land on the United States-Mexico border, curators ensure the roots of the lack of trust between Chicana people and the United States government receive attention and consideration.²³¹ Montoya's work acknowledges the complicated experiences of the Chicana people who live on and traverse border land even today.²³² In *Desire Lines, Baboquivari Peak, AZ* (fig. viii), acquired by the Smithsonian in 2011,²³³ a man spreads water jugs throughout the landscape while mountains rise in the distance in black and white photo taken at the border of the Tohono reserve in Arizona.²³⁴ In establishing the United States-Mexico border, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo split the ancestral Tohono lands between the two nations.²³⁵ Accessing their homelands creates logistical challenges, as it requires the Tohono people to cross the border.²³⁶ The Tohono occupied the land prior to the

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Carlos Jackson, *Chicana and Chicano Art*, 14.

²³² Carmen Ramos, "Delilah Montoya," in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2014): 247.

²³³ <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/desire-lines-baboquivari-peak-az-81630>

²³⁴ Carmen Ramos, "Delilah Montoya," in *Our America: the Latino Presence in American Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2014): 247.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

creation of the United States, and well before western expansions, yet found themselves bound to new national boundaries. These identities, histories and experiences, for all their complexities, demonstrate the dualities implicit to many American identities – and often not seen in the art displayed by public or private museums, in spite of their mission to serve the broad public.

While Kennicott may point to *Our America* as spanning too many identities, his criticism only highlights the need for more programming around Latinx art, which would allow for exhibits to home in on specific cultures, including the Chicana movement. The United States' rich Chicana history – dating back to how the country's borders formed, to advances in workers' rights and unionization, to advances in agricultural best practices, to educational reform – demonstrates the need for investments in exhibits like *Our America* as part of a complete telling of the country's storytelling. As The Smithsonian asserted in its 1994 *Willful Neglect* report, "The failure of the Smithsonian to reflect and represent Hispanic contributions is twice damaging. It denies Latinx people their right to feel recognized and valued as part of their country's heritage. At the same time, it perpetuates among the general population the inaccurate belief that Latinx people contributed little to our country's development or culture, rather than reflecting the multicultural history and accomplishments of the United States."²³⁷

By telling stories important to United States history and the American experience, Ramos' work with the *Our America* exhibition demonstrates the importance, and

²³⁷ The Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and United States Latinos* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1994): 3.

complexity, of rectifying the exclusion of Latinx narratives. By adding formerly excluded narratives to traditional spaces, museums reflect a more complete, and accurate, picture of not only American art but also American history and the American experience. Inclusion of Chicax works in museums also validates the experiences of this important and growing demographic group, an important museum audience.

In looking for successful models of diversification, boards, administrators and curators can learn much from the actions taken by The Smithsonian to address the concerns raised by its Willful Neglect report. Although The Smithsonian moved slowly, they made meaningful change by hiring representative employees, including E. Carmen Ramos, staging large-scale exhibits, such as *Our America*, and expanding their permanent collection ensuring the art and artists are preserved for the next generation.²³⁸ The Smithsonian's progress with Latinx, and Chicax art – starting with the *Our America* exhibition – sets an important example for other museums in the United States, leading the way for other museums to break the traditional American art canon and increase representation of minority groups.

²³⁸ Wayne Clough, "From the Castle," 10.

Chapter 4: Successful Institutional Transformation: A Look Inside the VMFA

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) serves as a case study demonstrating the direct impact an individual museum's policy decisions make on establishing or sabotaging its place as a steward for diverse art and artists. Throughout its 86-year history, distinct shifts in VMFA leadership, strategic direction, and policies defined three periods for the museum. Initially a racially progressive museum, specific changes in VMFA policy during the American Civil Rights movement transformed the institution into one that accepted, and even reflected, the segregationist norms of the American south. More than three decades after the Civil Rights movement, new museum leadership, both at the board and administrative levels, consciously developed a new strategy for the VMFA, reckoning with its institutional history, rebuilding public trust, and ultimately futureproofing the museum's relevance by undertaking meaningful efforts to diversify collections, exhibitions, programming, and audiences.

Founded in Richmond, Virginia in 1936, the VMFA set out to develop an inclusive collection and welcome all Virginians with the mission to, "collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, to encourage the study of the arts, and thus to enrich the lives of all."²³⁹ From its earliest era, the museum collected African American art, including painter Benjamin Wigfall and sculptor Leslie Bolling.²⁴⁰ By the assessment of Michael Taylor, the VMFA's Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education, the museum led the

²³⁹ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Business Plan Fiscal Years 2016 to 2020* (Richmond: VMFA, 2016): 1.

²⁴⁰ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

industry for its time, even providing fellowships to local African American artists.²⁴¹ The VMFA awarded Wigfall two fellowships and acquired his painting, *Chimneys* (fig. ix), in 1951, making him the youngest artist with a piece in the VMFA's permanent collection.²⁴² In addition to supporting a young African American artist by providing funding for his craft and education, the VMFA went further to include his work in its permanent collection, preserving for future generations. Wigfall's story demonstrates the bold policies supported by the VMFA at the height of the Jim Crow era in the South.

"It was really *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Commonwealth of Virginia's massive resistance to school integration, that really changed everything," according to Taylor.²⁴³ Virginia's resistance to racial integration resulted in the VMFA pausing their African American art acquisition program for over fifteen years, approximately between 1954 and 1970.²⁴⁴ During that period, the museum continued providing fellowships to African American artists, but museum policy required the fellows to enter and exit the VMFA through a secondary door.²⁴⁵ Consistent with practices across the southern United States prior to the 1960s civil rights movement, the VMFA segregated its theater space and installed colored bathrooms.²⁴⁶ During this period, the political and social

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Paige Baxter, "Remembering a Richmond-Born Artist," *Boomer* (2017): <https://www.boomermagazine.com/benjamin-wigfall/>

²⁴³ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

climate changed VMFA operations and practices, tainting the museum's historically progressive record.

Jim Crow laws emerged in the American South in the wake of the Civil War as means to oppress African Americans, reflecting the belief that Black citizens were inferior to whites on every level.²⁴⁷ These laws were put into place in order to prevent the miscegenation and implemented segregation across the American South.²⁴⁸ In addition to suppressing Black voting rights, these laws acted to separate races throughout all aspects of daily life by segregating public and private spaces including schools, public transportation, parks, and phone booths to name a few.²⁴⁹ Social customs required Black adults to refer to white adults using a formal title like Mrs. or Mr., or face alienation from their community.²⁵⁰ People of different races were not allowed to shake hands or touch, and mixed race events at the time were limited to funerals.²⁵¹

The museum board and staff aligned in their desire to acknowledge these wrongs in 2014, when the VMFA board appointed Billy Royall as its chair. Understanding the intellectual importance of the VMFA embracing its own heritage and telling its entire story, including the blemishes on the institution's record, Royall led the

²⁴⁷ Laerence Bobo, "Somewhere between Jim Crow and Post-Racialism: reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today," *Daedalus* 140, no. 2 (2011).

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Melissa Milewski, *Litigating Across the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 116.

²⁵⁰ David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States: 1920-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002): 278.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

board and staff into a period of reflection, followed by action.²⁵² The team carefully examined the VMFA's institutional history, uncovering its origins, promising start showcasing and even sponsoring artists of color, followed by the systems that enabled flawed decisions and discrimination to permeate the VMFA. Reckoning with this institutional injustice required the museum, located in the former capital of the confederacy, to face challenges. Under Royall's leadership, the board, staff and community began a dialogue to identify a path forward.²⁵³ The constituents agreed the VMFA should (1) acquire a new statue for the museum's entrance, and (2) increase its acquisition of African and African American art as part of their community outreach.²⁵⁴

The VMFA commissioned Kehinde Wiley to create *Rumors of War* (fig. x) to stand at the entrance of the museum.²⁵⁵ Installed in 2019, *Rumors of War* depicts a young African American man on horseback. The horse wears a bridle with reins and saddle with stirrups and looks downwards towards the ground. It lifts its right front leg, the left elongated to its fullest height. The two back legs remain bent, lifting the front of the horse above its backside and elevating the rider. The man sits atop the horse, both feet secured in the stirrups. He holds the reins tightly with one hand and grabs the back of the saddle with the other. His body twists to the right and the figure looks over his shoulder, staring into the distance. The man wears jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and Nike brand tennis shoes. His hair is styled in dreadlocks that have been tied back from

²⁵² Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

his face. The bronze sculpture sits on a large granite base with an inscription that reads *Rumors of War Kehinde Wiley 2019*.

As the former capital of the defeated and defunct Confederate States of America, Richmond emerged, for some, as a site for celebrating “the lost cause” of the southern states’ loss of the United States’ Civil War.²⁵⁶ Jim Crow era monuments arose throughout the city along Monument Avenue, featuring prominent Confederate leaders, including Jefferson Davis, Matthew Fontaine Maury, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and J. E. B. Stewart.²⁵⁷ Although Virginia removed the statues throughout 2020 and 2021, at the time the VMFA installed Wiley’s *Rumors of War*, in 2019, the hotly debated bronze statues still stood.²⁵⁸

Unlike these confederate memorials, *Rumors of War* honors not a single person, but pays homage to Black men who have been killed throughout history from their inhumane treatment at the hands of enslavers to modern day race-based killings committed by police and civilians in the United States.²⁵⁹ The horseman’s hoodie is significant as it ties the statue to the present day racialized violence in the United States, such as the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin who was profiled by police for wearing a dark gray hoodie.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ Matthew Mace *Barbee, Race and Masculinity in Southern Memory: History of Richmond, Virginia’s Monument Avenue, 1948-1996* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014): 84.

²⁵⁷ Paul Kiem, “Righting History: Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia,” *Public History Review* 28 (2021): 133.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁵⁹ Cat Dawson, “Ruptured structures: Race and representation in contemporary antimonuments,” *Art & the Public Sphere* 20, no.1 (2021): 104.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

In commissioning a work, instead of purchasing an existing piece at auction or from a gallery, the VMFA maximized the opportunity for an artist to create a piece specific for Richmond, choosing materials and design connected to Richmond's history, and even a design theme that evokes strong emotional connections to Richmond's history with race, dating back to the Civil War, Jim Crow era construction of the Monument Avenue statues, and movement to remove them. Today, Wiley's *Rumor of War* remains – a victorious reminder of the Confederate monuments brought down by social progress.

The VMFA's approach to partnering with the community, and commissioning *Rumors of War*, worked to its advantage on many levels. By engaging the public in the project, the VMFA began the process of re-building trust with the public it serves. The museum recognized the practical and symbolic importance of partnering with the community, particularly the Black community, who'd been dis-enfranchised by the museum's segregationist policies and practices for decades. By prioritizing the Wiley commission to the front of the five-year strategic plan, the VMFA quickly built credibility with the Richmond and Virginia community that the museum intended to follow through on its commitments. Even the prominent location of *Rumors of War*, located at the museum's front entrance, sends a powerful message to the VMFA's constituents every day: Black art, Black artists, and Black visitors do not need to use the side door at the VFMA.

To achieve the second goal the VMFA agreed with the community – increasing its acquisition of African-American and Black art, in 2015, the VMFA board also launched

search for a new Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education, resulting in the hiring of Michael Taylor, who has played a major role in the diversification of the museum's collection.²⁶¹ Reporting to the VMFA director, Taylor manages a team of fifteen curators and is accountable for the VMFA's exhibitions.²⁶² The dual role – incorporating curation and education – provides Taylor broad influence on museum operations and contributes to rapid change. In 2015, Taylor and the Board developed and launched an ambitious five-year strategic plan that detailed their approach to diversification. Of the four plan's four tenets, the first encapsulated the two points agreed from the public dialogue about how to address diversity at the VFMA.²⁶³ By clearly stating their intention, "On the Museum's campus, create exceptional experiences of art and culture that engage, captivate and delight a growing and diverse visitor base,"²⁶⁴ the VMFA quickly established public trust in the agreed mission. The board also aligned the VMFA budget to match the stated mission, with one-third of the museum's acquisitions budget dedicated to African and African American art, yielding an investment of over two million dollars per year.²⁶⁵ The museum also committed that half, two of four, of its annual exhibitions would feature African, African American, or Native American art.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Business Plan Fiscal Years 2016 to 2020* (Richmond: VMFA, 2016): 8.

²⁶² Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁶³ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Business Plan Fiscal Years 2016 to 2020* (Richmond: VMFA, 2016): 8.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

By incorporating its intentions into the strategic plan, the VMFA leadership strengthened its commitment to diversifying the museum's collections – making the decision more than the whim of a single board chair or curator, instead embedding the commitment into museum policy. Per AAM standards, including the intention to diversify its collection and programming in the strategic plan requires measuring the VMFA's success against that mission – increasing the likelihood of institutional follow through.²⁶⁷ The VMFA also wisely established a financial budget aligned to its curatorial strategy, another key success factor to ensuring the strategy's success. The inclusion of exhibits dedicated to diverse artists not only proved financially beneficial, but also added to building public trust, as the visitor traffic flow for the shows created positive word-of-mouth and public relations buzz about the VMFA's progress towards its efforts to improve inclusivity, further re-building public trust. In this way, the VMFA's deliberate decision to include exhibits in its program for diversifying its offering and audiences proved rewarding on many levels.

Beyond the investment in exhibits and the lauded Wiley commission, the VMFA also made savvy, albeit less prominent, acquisitions for its permanent collection. Curators aim to develop their museum's permanent collection by making meaningful, high-quality acquisitions, to build out the range and completeness of the collection for preservation and study.²⁶⁸ Their work requires assessing the museum's current

²⁶⁷ "Ethics, Standards, and Professional Practices: Core Standards for Museums," *American Alliance of Museums*: <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/core-standards-for-museums/>

²⁶⁸ Elizabeth Schlatter, *Museum Careers* (California: Left Coast Press Inc., 2008), 57-58.

collection, making deaccessioning decisions, and identifying areas of expansion.²⁶⁹ Of course, curators must work within the financial controls of the institution's budget, not only to acquire, but to preserve and restore existing collections. Museums receive pieces through bequests, gifts, loans, and also purchase art. With soaring art valuations, building a permanent collection through acquisition is an expensive proposition, even for a well-funded regional museum like the VMFA.

In looking to expand the representation of African-American artists, as outlined in its strategic plan, the VMFA looked to tactics previously deployed by Atlanta's High Museum of Art, which owns the highest representation of African American artists of any museum in the United States.²⁷⁰ The High began collecting southern American folk art in the 1970s,²⁷¹ and more recently expanded its contemporary African-American art collection by partnering with the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation.²⁷²

Following in The High's footsteps, in 2018, the VMFA partnered with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation to acquire 34 pieces by African-American artists.²⁷³ The VMFA acquisitions included sculptures, drawings and paintings, including works by Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Ruth Kennedy, Nettie Young, and Gee's Bend Alabama quilts.²⁷⁴ In acquiring the additional Dial paintings, the VMFA added to its existing collection Dial

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Chad Topaz, et al, "Diversity of Artists in major United States Museums:" 8.

²⁷¹ Katherine Jentleson, "Folk and Self-Taught Art," The High Museum of Art: https://high.org/collection_area/folk-and-self-taught-art/

²⁷² Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Press Release, April 25, 2017: <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/news/high-museum-art-acquires-54-works-art-souls-grown-deep-foundation>

²⁷³ Art And Object, Press Release, May 25, 2018: <https://www.artandobject.com/press-release/virginia-museum-fine-arts-acquires-34-artworks-souls-grown-deep-foundation>

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

works, including *Old Buck: The Negro Got to Find Out What's Going on in the United States* (Fig. xi) and *Freedom Cloth* (Fig. xii), which board chair Bill Royall and his wife donated to the museum in 2015.²⁷⁵ Combining strategic gifts, aligned with the museum's stated mission, and partnering with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation allowed the VMFA to make a large acquisition, spanning multiple departments, significantly advancing its mission to increase the diversity of its permanent collection, and doing so in a financially prudent approach. Just as the VMFA's deliberate policy decisions marginalized and disenfranchised African-American artists and art during the Civil Rights movement, the VMFA's Souls Grown Deep acquisition demonstrates the positive impact of thoughtful, deliberate museum board and curatorial decisions made on building diverse and inclusive collections.

Upon completing the acquisition, the VMFA staged an exhibit in 2019 to share the new collection, *Cosmologies from the Tree of Life: Art from the African American South*.²⁷⁶ The exhibition featured the 34 new works added to the permanent collection. Among the works featured in the exhibition, were several works by self-taught artists including prominent Thornton Dial sculptures such as his 1994 *Tree of Life (In the Image of Old Things)*, for which the exhibition was titled (fig. xiii).²⁷⁷ Dial was born in

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ *Cosmologies From the Tree of Life: Art from the African American South*, The Souls Grown Deep Foundation (2019): <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/exhibition/cosmologies-tree-life-art-african-american-south>

²⁷⁷ *Photos: Art from the African American South opens at VMFA*, The Richmond Times-Dispatch (2019): https://richmond.com/entertainment/art/photos-art-from-the-african-american-south-opens-at-vmfa/collection_fe465541-f7a2-51f6-8ecf-a18cafb1415a.html#1

1928, raised by his great-aunt, Sarah Dial Lockett,²⁷⁸ and worked as a metalworker at the Pullman Standard car plant until its closure in 1981.²⁷⁹ Following the plant's closure, Dial and his sons started making metal garden furniture in their garage.²⁸⁰ All of the skills Dial used to create his sculptures came from Dial's various work training including blacksmithing, welding, carpentry, concrete mixing, fishnet making, and house painting.²⁸¹

Tree of Life demonstrates Dial's mastery of these techniques, combining materials including wood, tree roots, a rubber tire, wire, fabric, plastic air freshener, enamel, and industrial sealing compound.²⁸² The sculpture, which was completed the year before his Aunt's death in 1995, presents Dial's reflections on his heritage and the balance between remaining true to past traditions, while also adapting to the modern day.²⁸³ The inverted tire used by Dial was a flower pot owned by Sarah Dial Lockett, and its use at the base of the statue emphasizes the ways in which old traditions lead to the growth of new life.²⁸⁴ The VMFA's *Art from the African American South* further demonstrates the museum's authentic commitment to uplifting African American artists. By including self-taught artists in the exhibition and adding these works to the

²⁷⁸ William Arnett, "A Network of Ideas," from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South* edited by Paul Arnet and William Arnet (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000): 183.

²⁷⁹ Colleen Curran, "'Our goal is to be in the top three in the world when it comes to African American art,' VMFA opens *Art from the African American South*," *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* (2019): https://richmond.com/entertainment/art/our-goal-is-to-be-in-the-top-three-in-the-world-when-it-comes/article_03ff37f4-27e9-50a7-b2a2-c0791782bbf2.html

²⁸⁰ William Arnett, "A Network of Ideas," from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South* edited by Paul Arnet and William Arnet (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000): 176.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

permanent collection, the VMFA challenges traditional art historical notions of high art and fosters a collection inclusive of artists from all backgrounds.

As the VMFA's five-year plan concluded, in 2020, its board extended some of the initiatives into a new five-year plan, for 2021-2026, acknowledging the progress made during the first period but the remaining work to accomplish.²⁸⁵ In addition to extending its commitment to invest one-third of its acquisition budget in African and African American art, the VMFA also committed to growing their collection in other under-represented artists, including women artists, LGBTQ+, Latinx, Indigenous, Islamic, and Asian artists.²⁸⁶

Because of its hometown's place in the country's history, in some ways the VMFA faces a unique challenge. Coupled with the self-inflicted damage prior VMFA decision makers wrought on the institution after *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, just facing the problem presented challenges. Undaunted by the understanding that acknowledging the past injustices could, at best, be a starting point for organizational transformation, Royal and Taylor still set about reclaiming the VMFA's legacy. In Taylor's words, "You have to own it. It's not pleasant. It's not a thing that you like doing. But if you don't own it, you can't ever get to a place where everyone feels welcome at

²⁸⁵ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁸⁶ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2021 to 2025* (Richmond: VMFA, 2021): 15.

the museum.”²⁸⁷ In this way, probing for an authentic understanding of the museum’s history allowed the VMFA’s board and staff to identify areas of potential growth.

Beyond good intentions, the VMFA’s available funds for new acquisitions demonstrably contribute to progressing the museum’s agenda for diversifying its permanent collection. With an annual acquisition budget of approximately seven million dollars, curators invested about ten million, over five years, in expanding the VMFA’s collection of African and African American art.²⁸⁸ As a result of such careful strategic planning, the VMFA’s donors base increased since the implementation of its strategic plan, and when raising money for their 2020 *Dirty South* exhibition, the museum broke its own fundraising record.²⁸⁹

Unlike many museum diversification initiatives, the VMFA enjoyed alignment between key stakeholders, including its board. In fact, due to Royal’s passion, the VMFA initiative to diversify the permanent collection was board led. By then incorporating the goals into the strategic plans, Royal ensured the objectives took on not only urgency, but consistency, allowing the curatorial and programming staff to stay the course for five years, confident in their board support and funding. By clearly outlining the VMFA’s direction in the 2015-2020 strategic plan, the VMFA ensured all stakeholders, including community constituents, aligned to the same financial plan and timelines, allowing all parties to hold the VMFA to the same expectations.

²⁸⁷ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

In the end, the VMFA built public trust by following through on the commitments outlined in the strategic plan, including the diversification of the permanent collection, the installation of *Rumors of War*, and dedicating half its programming to under-represented artists. Timely execution of the plan built relationship capital amongst stakeholders, which Taylor expects to pay benefits on future community collaborations. The VMFA already reports positive returns in terms of increased visitor counts, more diverse visitor representation and increased donations – all key metrics for museums measuring progress with diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Ultimately, the VMFA's success may boil down to audience understanding, which required careful analysis of its audience – not only who the audience is, but how the museum needs to change to best serve the audience. In addition to assessing its own history, the VMFA analyzed their stakeholder audience – including the tourist population to Richmond and the population of the Commonwealth of Virginia.²⁹⁰ In comparing its 2014 visitor traffic to the demographic makeup of Virginia, the VMFA identified groups previously not visiting the museum.²⁹¹ Identifying those constituencies allowed the VMFA to reimagine its visitor experience through the lens of those populations.

In particular, the VMFA realized a missed opportunity to serve African Americans and young families, two populations not attracted to traditional museum experiences.²⁹² The

²⁹⁰ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Business Plan Fiscal Years 2016 to 2020* (Richmond: VMFA, 2016): 8.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

VMFA honed in on the perceptions and specific consideration drivers and concerns for each group.²⁹³ Using the data gleaned from the research, the VMFA developed audience personas and re-imagined the museum visitor experience through the lens of those personas, resulting in specific, concrete changes to the programming and events calendar, the layout of the museum, and even training for museum employees and volunteers to ensure positive visit outcomes.²⁹⁴

Several aspects of the VMFA's approach to diversifying their collection differ from what other institutions have done. Taylor credits the VMFA's willingness to acknowledge its imperfect past, unwavering commitment of capital funds to diversifying the permanent collection, board alignment, and incorporating the initiatives into not one, but two consecutive strategic plans.²⁹⁵ The VMFA also made meaningful changes to museum operations – consolidating curatorial and educational responsibilities under a single leader, ensured administrative and board alignment, incorporated community input, and made dramatic changes to the museum visitor experience, to ensure the physical environment welcomed Virginia residents, regardless of background. After seven years of hard work, Taylor acknowledges that the VMFA now enjoys many fruits of its labors – a more diverse permanent collection, higher and more diverse attendance figures, and record-breaking fundraising; however, he's quick to acknowledge more

²⁹³ The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Strategic Business Plan Fiscal Years 2016 to 2020* (Richmond: VMFA, 2016): 8.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹⁵ Michael Taylor (Chief Curator and Deputy for Art and Education at the VMFA) in discussion with the author, January 2022.

work remains.²⁹⁶ Taylor's modesty aside, the VMFA's outcome set the bar for institutional success in achieving demonstrable, sustained success, by the measurement of all stakeholders.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

While inclusion isn't a salve for prejudice, it can serve to educate as to diverse perspectives and experiences, serving as a foundation for cross-cultural understanding and growth. Using their collections, exhibits and programming, museums can provide their audiences thought provoking and even transformative experiences. Sustained and effective diversification is not a one size fits all process, instead requiring the adoption of tactics tailored to the specific needs and culture of each institution. That said, museum boards, administrators and curators committed to imparting meaningful change should look to the lessons learned, both in terms of what works and what doesn't, from institutions who've gone before them — ranging from the Smithsonian's slow progress to demonstrate Latinx inclusion in spite of an early commitment and vast resources to the VMFA's rapid turnaround once its board and operational leadership aligned in a shared mission to increase the representation of Black and African American artists and audiences. The case studies explored here demonstrate the growth potential for arts institutions that commit to effective strategic planning aligned to operational budgeting and tactical program execution, with clear accountability for outcomes. With more institutions undertaking inclusion initiatives, modeling their efforts on the lessons learned is critical not only to optimize individual institution success, but to steadily increase the pace of diversification across the museum sector, ultimately future-proofing museums by remaining relevant to better serve evolving audiences.

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Appendix

Figure i: Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, screenprint on paper, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/46999>



Figure ii: Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1993 (image sourced from Noralee Frankel, "Exhibit Reviews," *The Public Historian* 15, no. 3 (1993): 105.)



Figure iii: Annie Mae Young, *Housetop Variation*, undated, Fabric, <https://high.org/collections/housetop-variation/>



Figure iv: Thornton Dial, *Crossing Waters*, 2006-2011, wire fencing, clothing, cloth, wood, metal, corrugated tin, shoe, ceramic figurines, and paint on canvas on wood, <https://high.org/collections/crossing-waters/>



Figure v: Eldren Bailey, *Pyramid*, 1970s, concrete, plastic beads, pennies, jewelry, buttons, wood, <https://high.org/collections/pyramid/>



Figure vi: Melesio Casas, *Humanscapes 62*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/humanscape-62-84441>

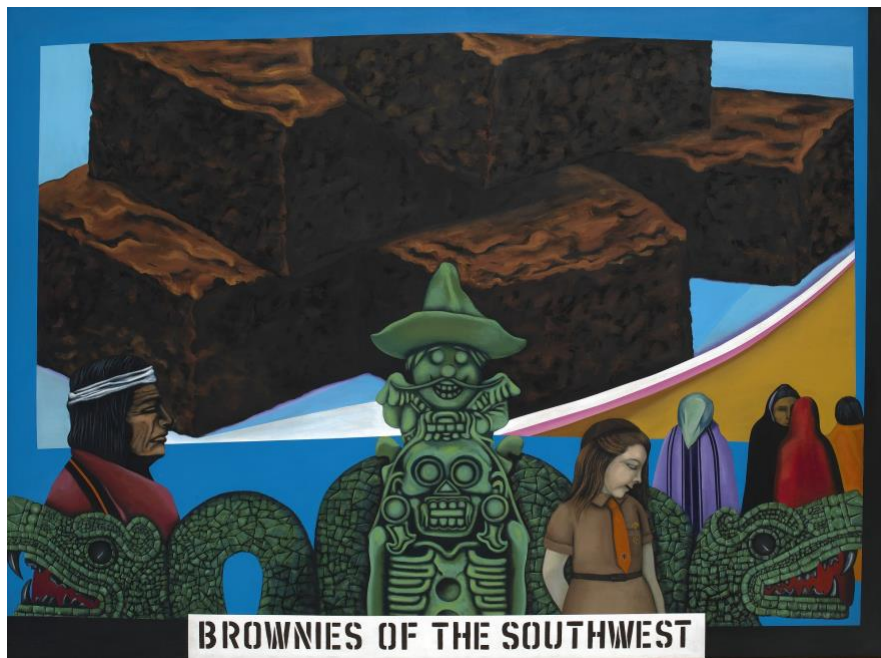


Figure vii: Ester Hernandez, *Sun Mad*, 1982, screenprint on paper, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/sun-mad-34712>

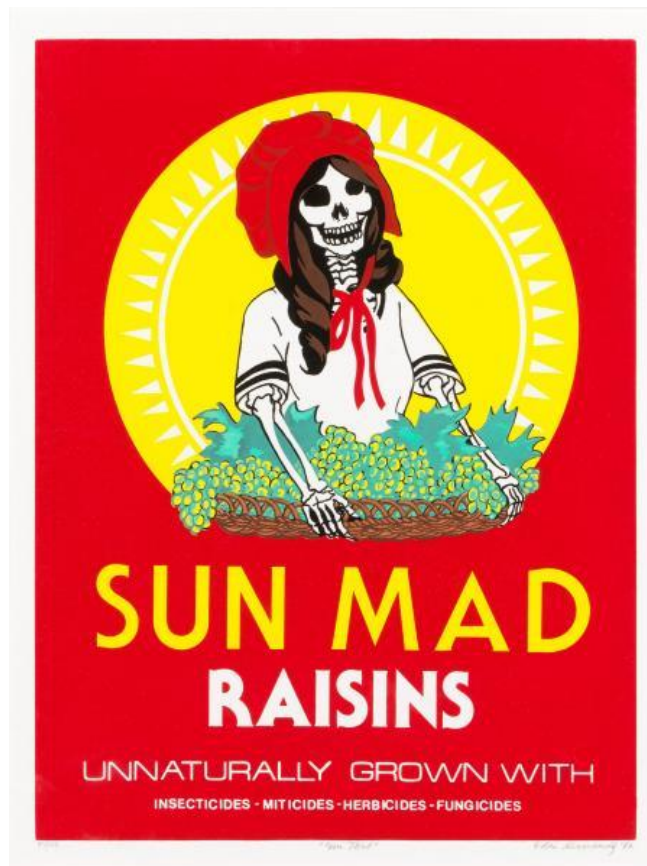


Figure viii: Delilah Montoya, *Desire Lines, Baboquivari Peak, AZ*, 2004, inkjet print,
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/desire-lines-baboquivari-peak-az-81630>



Figure ix: Benjamin Wigfall, *Chimneys*, 1951, oil on canvas,
<http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/VMFA-Focus-on-African-American-Art>



Figure x: Kehinde Wiley, *Rumors of War*, 2019, bronze statue on limestone base, <https://www.johnsonmarketing.com/jmi-blog/2020/2/25/kehide-wileys-rumors-of-war>



Figure xi: Thornton Dial, *Old Buck: The Negro Got to Find Out What's Going on in the United States*, 2002, carpet, oil, enamel, spray paint, splash zone compound on canvas and wood, https://richmond.com/entertainment/art/vmfa-adds-18-works-including-nine-from-african-american-artists/article_d1a790bc-bba9-5b5b-b0c9-57473f0e848a.html



Figure xii: Thornton Dial, *Freedom Cloth*, 2005, cloth, coat hangers, steel, wire, artificial plants and flowers, enamel, and spray paint, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/thornton-dial/work/freedom-cloth>



Figure xiii: Thornton Dial, *Tree of Life (In the Image of Old Things)*, 1994, found wood, roots, rubber tire, wire, fabric, plastic air freshener, enamel, industrial sealing compound, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/thornton-dial/work/tree-life-image-old-things>

