

Museum Diversity in the Spotlight

08.02.18 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Several recent studies confirm a problem in the top leadership ranks of America's museums: a dramatic gender and racial gap. It's no coincidence that "[t]he demographic profile of museum board members reveals considerable ethnic and racial homogeneity along with minimal age diversity"; in other words, it's mostly older, white guys.

Two recent high-level appointments in the New York area have raised questions – and eyebrows.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The esteemed Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of the world's most prestigious cultural institutions, has had more than its share of governance troubles and controversies in the past few years. Over a year ago, the former director, Thomas Campbell, submitted his resignation as director "amid budgetary woes and whiffs of office scandal." Before that, there had been unusual turnover in this position.

After an extensive search, the Met went outside its ranks (for the first time in 60 years) to recruit a stellar candidate as its 10th director: Max Hollein, "one of Germany's most inventive curators," who is "known for collecting money and art like no one else." He has a "track record of innovative installations, successful fundraising, and record attendance levels at his prior institutions," including three in Frankfurt, the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale in 2005 and the Fine Arts Museums in San Francisco.

He also has a history of "working to diversify museums' representations of art," and "is a well-liked administrator known for his digital savvy, his diplomacy, and his rare ability to speak fluently about Old Masters and contemporary art alike."

Nevertheless, the appointment has not been universally hailed; some have "expressed disappointment that the Met did not take the opportunity to recruit a director who would personally represent a commitment to more inclusive leadership."

For instance, a former head of administration of the J. Paul Getty Museum, “said he wished the Met had broken precedent by hiring a woman to be its next director.”

In a New York Times op-ed on April 12, 2018, titled *Appointing Yet Another White, Male Director is a Missed Opportunity for the Met*, Dr. Liza Oliver, an art history assistant professor at Wellesley College and a former fellow at the Met, recalled that, after the former director’s resignation in February 2017, “a spate of petitions urged the Met to seriously consider hiring a woman as his replacement.” She was among “several scholars” who –

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wrote on the underrepresentation of women, and particularly women of color, in leadership posts in the country’s top museums, despite outnumbering men in positions that typically lead to top jobs. Lest the Met’s board think no women are qualified to lead the museum, the website Artnet compiled a list of those exceptionally suited for the job.

From some quarters, this sentiment – that is, “expressly setting out to hire a female director” – was dismissed as “ridiculous.” Dr. Oliver, in her current piece, notes that this “dismissiveness highlights how white men are often unaware of the manifold ways they have benefited, both historically and presently, from the very identity politics they criticize among women and minorities. Women pushing for a percentage of leadership positions that reflects their numbers are rebuked for prioritizing identity over merit — even though more women in the field are better qualified than their male colleagues.”

The Brooklyn Museum

The Brooklyn Museum recently announced an opening for a temporary, part-time position as Sills Family Consulting Curator, African Art. The person selected was hailed by the museum’s chief curator, Jennifer Chi, as “the perfect choice to build upon the Brooklyn Museum’s track record as an innovator in the collection and exhibition of the arts of Africa.” Similar praise came from the museum’s director, Anne Pasternak, as someone who “will assess and rethink the Brooklyn Museum’s extensive holdings of African art, which is comprised of more than 6,000 objects, and organize an innovative, freshly conceived temporary installation showcasing the breadth and depth of the collection.”

The appointee has a Ph.D. from Princeton University, is a historian of African arts and architecture, held lectureships at Columbia University and was a Mellon Collections Research Specialist (African Arts) at the Princeton University Art Museum.

Nevertheless, the selection of this high-credentialed person – a woman, 31-year-old Kristen Windmuller-Luna – was met with criticism. The issue: She is white.

“Reactions to the news of Windmuller-Luna’s appointment have been passionate and varied.”

There was “backlash on Twitter” and “many op-eds” along the general theme of “Why are white curators still running African art collections?” One activist group “has demanded that the museum more fully address the hiring decision by convening a commission that would explore a number of options going forward – including diversifying the curatorial staff. ‘No matter how one parses it, the appointment is simply not a good look – especially on the part of a museum that prides itself on its relationships with the diverse communities in Brooklyn.’”

There are defenders of the selection, though. For instance, Steven Nelson, an African-American professor of African and African American art history at UCLA, has noted the “reality” in the African art studies field; that is, it’s “dominated by white curators.” He adds that Ms. Windmuller-Luna is “richly deserving of the Brooklyn position.” The real culprit is “structural.”

“The writer and curator Kimberly Drew made a similar point, noting, ‘A lot of non-black people study African Art,’” and adding that “84 percent of curatorial positions are held by white people. This is the actual problem.”

Despite the controversy, the Brooklyn Museum stands by its hiring decision.

Conclusion

This issue of diversity in nonprofits – generally – and in the museum world, particularly, will undoubtedly continue to be a flash point in the near future.