

## AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

American Alliance of Museums has been bringing museums together since 1906, helping to develop standards and best practices, gathering and sharing knowledge, and providing advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. Representing more than thirty-five thousand individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions, and corporate partners serving the museum field, the alliance stands for the broad scope of the museum community.

American Alliance of Museums' mission is to champion museums and nurture excellence in partnership with its members and allies.

Books published by AAM further the Alliance's mission to make standards and best practices for the broad museum community widely available.



**American  
Alliance of  
Museums**

# Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums

Edited by  
Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Laura L. Lott

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

colleagues, if *Excellence and Equity* is your Bible when it comes to being inclusive, my advice is to change your religion!

One thing that always makes me sick to my stomach is whenever I hear someone in a mainstream institution say that he or she would love to hire more people of color but can't find them. Give me a break! Where in the world are you looking? Are people of color playing hide and seek? As the executive director of a museum, I have hired many Mexican professionals. Why is it that I can find Mexicans, but the mainstream museums can't? Am I smarter than they are? Do I have better eyesight than they do? The idea that there are no qualified candidates of color is ludicrous. I have known many museum professionals of color with the "right" credentials who have been bypassed for jobs. Furthermore, there has been a trend in recent years in the museum field to hire nonmuseum professionals in such areas as education, public relations, marketing, and even for the museum director's job. Yet mainstream museums are still unable to find people of color.

Part of the problem with changing the racial and ethnic composition of museums lies with some of the people of color who work at these institutions. They need to speak up and educate their institutions about being inclusive. Too often they believe that since they have museum jobs, their communities have "made it" and that there is no problem, at least at their institutions. As executive director of a culturally grounded museum, I believe it is imperative that individuals like me have serious dialogues with other mainstream cultural institutions and museums. To that end, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum has probably done as many collaborations with mainstream museums and cultural institutions as any museum in the country. Most of the time, it isn't easy. But if I see progress, no matter how small, I feel good that things are moving in the right direction. However, I also have turned down or dropped out of collaborations that I felt were more about accommodating funders or trustees than about trying to make change at the institution.

You know, I love my job, I have the best job in the world. I have the pleasure and honor of sharing my culture with both my community and the larger community as well. I never want to leave my institution. But if I had another life, I would cherish the challenge of integrating a mainstream museum because I know that it can be done. I have no doubt. However, it would mean getting rid of people who aren't on the same page.

It really scares me to see the continual unwillingness of mainstream museums to treat people with equity. If museums cannot deal with diverse groups, then one has to assume that the country can't either. What does that mean for our nation's future?

### 3

## Museums, Diversity, and Social Value

*Johnnetta Betsch Cole*

*This essay was adapted from remarks delivered at the 2015 AAM Annual Meeting.*

What I have chosen to do in this keynote address is to make the case that our museums can and must be of social value by not only inspiring but creating change around one of the most critical issues of our time—the issue of diversity. That means inspiring and creating far greater diversity in our workforces, our exhibitions, our educational programs, and among our visitors.

I want to turn to our colleagues who are here from museums around the world to say this: as I discuss the need for greater diversity in U.S. museums, please know that I know that your realities may be quite different in terms of diversity. I only hope that some of the points I will make will be helpful to you.

I also want to acknowledge that I am drawing most heavily on the question of diversity in art museums given my experience and expertise in the area. To my colleagues who work in zoological parks and aquariums, while I know that you too are wrestling with questions of diversity, I humbly acknowledge my lack of expertise in the application of the principles of diversity to your unique settings. Therefore, while I may not mention or make specific references to your institutions, I trust you are able to take the principles outlined herein and apply them naturally and rigorously to your own institutions.

Colleagues, I believe that we can neither fully carry out the visions and the missions of our museums, nor can our museums continue to be of social value, if we do not do what is required to have more diversity in who works in our museums, in the work we present in our museums, in the audiences we welcome to our museums, and in the philanthropic and board leadership in our museums.

One of my "sheroes," the late Dr. Maya Angelou, issued a call to all women and men who are parents when she said: "It is time for parents to teach young people



that says in countless ways: "All colleagues from all backgrounds are welcome at this museum table!"

In addition to asking about racial and ethnic diversity among museum staff, we must also ask who visits our museums? While people of color make up over one-third of the American population, according to a National Endowment for the Arts report, they make up only 9 percent of museum visitors.

As Ford Bell, President of the American Alliance of Museums, has said, "The big challenge is going to be how museums deal with the increasingly diverse American public, which could be 30 percent or more Hispanic by 2050. If you go to a museum, and don't see anyone who looks like you, from visitors to staff, and the boards are not reflecting the community, you may be less likely to come back, or even to go in the first place."

Marketing studies affirm the rather obvious fact that African Americans are more likely to attend events that are characterized as "Black themed" and events where Black people are well represented among performers. Studies of Latino attitudes toward museums show similar results. A report and survey by the Smithsonian American History Museum found second-generation Latinos surveyed had "very strong expectations that museums should include diverse staff, bilingual interpretation, Latino perspectives and some Latino themed content."

In Houston, our colleague, the late Peter Marzio of the Museum of Fine Arts (MFAH), started a Latin American department in response to the city's rapidly expanding Latino community. Peter also added several permanent Asian art galleries in response to Houston's growing and diverse Asian community. And he did not start these exhibitions and programs in some vacuum, but rather by engaging the local community and asking what they wanted. This has resulted in very strong local support, donations, and engagement. As an example, the Korean community donated over \$2 million for a permanent art collection.

I turn now to the situation of those of us who are described in a Native American saying as holding up half of the sky—us women folk. Where do we stand in terms of women on museum staffs?

Among the museums in the Association of Art Museum Directors, women make up slightly less than 50 percent of the directors. However, of the 243 members of the Association of Art Museum Directors, there are only five African American women! It is also important to note that women lag behind men in directorships held at museums with budgets over \$15 million. And women (primarily White women, given the paltry number of women of color) earn seventy-one cents to every dollar earned by male directors.

From the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, here are these facts:

- 51 percent of visual artists today are women.
- Over the past fifteen years, only 28 percent of museums' solo exhibitions spotlighted women (limited to eight selected museums).

- Only twenty-seven women are represented in the current edition of H. W. Jan-son's seminal textbook, *History of Art*, up from zero in the 1980s.
- Less than 3 percent of the artists in the modern section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art are women, but 83 percent of the nudes are women!

Calvert Investments discovered that companies whose commitment to diversity was viewed as "robust" were not only at a financial advantage but were also better positioned to generate long-term shareholder value. In addition, advocacy groups like Catalyst (a nonprofit organization that promotes inclusive workplaces for women) found that Fortune 500 companies with higher percentages of women board members significantly outperformed companies with fewer female members. And let us note that women have more philanthropic clout than ever before, consistently outgiving their male counterparts. Clearly, museums have something to gain by including more women on their staff, on their boards, and in their exhibitions.

The relationship between American museums and LGBTQ communities is similarly lopsided. Whatever the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals there are among museum professionals, such statistics are not available, American museums have paid grossly insufficient attention to artworks done by and about individuals of these communities.

The exhibition at the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (November 18, 2011–February 12, 2012), was the first mainstream museum exhibition to focus on themes of gender and sexuality in modern American portraiture. As you may recall, there was a major controversy around that exhibition when the Smithsonian removed a 1987 video about the suffering caused by AIDS. Many in the LGBTQ community—a community that had suffered disproportionately from the AIDS crisis—and some individuals from other communities felt this was an act of censorship. At the Smithsonian, conversations continue about what can be learned from that controversy, and how we can better steward the voices of marginalized populations when political blowback may be forthcoming.

We must also address the question of how inclusive our museums are in terms of exhibitions curated by and for differently abled people. Generally, museums do a fair job of adhering to legal requirements for accommodation, such as wheelchair ramps. And some museums are now creating ways that individuals who are visually impaired or blind can enjoy art works in museums. But fully including the disabled community means going beyond access to exhibits. We must ask ourselves to what extent our museums welcome disabled professional staff and artists, and the extent to which our museums accommodate and welcome people with invisible disabilities, like the neurodiversity of autism or dyslexia. Imagine the creativity we could ignite by commissioning a work of art for autistic children, a work that allowed for physical manipulation and soothing stimulation. Imagine the number of parents who would bring their children and become grateful patrons.

Finally, in terms of underrepresented groups, I pose this question: How are our museums doing in terms of igniting the interest of the folks that I respectfully, yet

playfully, call the young'uns? As you know, millennials are quite different from yesterday's museumgoers in how they see the world, how they engage with technology, and how they pursue their interests. It is not being overly dramatic to say that unless we make changes in our museums that will speak to the patterns and interests of young people, when the middle-aged and older folks who are now our core visitors go on off to glory, our museum galleries will be places in which there is a dwindling number of visitors. We all know that our museums must become more technologically savvy if we are to court young adults whose electronic devices have become extensions of their minds and bodies.

Not only is reaching out to the millennial generation important for cultivating healthy visitorship, but it is critical for preparing the next generation of donors and trustees. While the baby boomer generation has been the main source of charitable giving and philanthropic leadership for decades, the realities and habits of the millennial generation are not the same as the current aging generation. From a recent *TrendsWatch* report compiled by our American Alliance of Museums and a recent *New York Times* article, "Wooing a New Generation of Museum Patrons," we learn this:

While charitable giving in the United States has remained stable for the last 40 years, there is reason for concern. Boomers today control 70 percent of the nation's disposable income. Millennials don't yet have nearly as much cash on hand. And those who do are increasingly drawn to social, rather than artistic, causes.<sup>1,2</sup>

The fiscal reality of the millennial generation is not the same as the reality of older generations. Tax laws are changing, and wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated, which will in turn affect the philanthropic habits and the focus on giving of the younger generation. In addition, there may just be fewer wealthy patrons and donors, making donor relations and cultivation a more critical and targeted effort.

Colleagues, when we pause to confront the need for far greater diversity in our museums, in many ways, we are at the proverbial fork in the road. We must decide if we will continue on our path so that our museums reflect the histories, cultures, art, and science of only some of the many people who make up our nation and our world, or if we will take the other path, which requires bravely cutting through old habits and institutional resistance to inspire and create change.

If your museum is large or small, old or young, famous or not yet famous, the need for seeking and sustaining diversity in your museums and in mine has never been greater. If we are to be relevant in this ever-changing world, to stay artistically and financially viable, all of our museums must boldly, indeed bodaciously, commit to reenvisioning what takes place in our museums, to whom our museums belong, and which colleagues have the privilege of telling important stories through the power of science, history, culture, and art.

As members of AAM, you my colleagues are aware of efforts in this organization to address issues of diversity in our museums. There are also programs initiated by other museum organizations, like the Association of Art Museum Directors, and

by institutions like the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to encourage far greater involvement of underrepresented groups in every facet of American museums.

In this city that was the birthplace of one of the greatest drum majors for justice in our nation's history, I ask us to commit to the task of bringing greater diversity to American museums and to the work that our museums do. And there is no time that is more appropriate for us to carry out this commitment than right now. So let us heed the counsel of Atlanta's son, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in terms of how we are to get this critical work done. He said, "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward."

If you are at all curious as to who in your organization is responsible for making our museums more representative of the diversity of our nation and our world, let me end by telling you a story that was a favorite of a great civil rights worker, Fannie Lou Hamer.

A group of boys decided to play hooky from school. To entertain themselves they decided to mess with a bird that one of the boys had caught. Soon, they were bored, so the ringleader said: "I know what we can do, we can find the old lady who lives up the road and ask her a question about this bird that she will never be able to answer. I will hold this bird behind my back and say, 'Old lady, old lady, this bird that I have behind my back, is it dead or is it alive?' If she says the bird is dead, I will release the bird so that it can fly away. But if she says that the bird is alive, I will crush it."

Convinced that the old lady would never be able to answer the question about the bird they gave each other high fives and fist bumps before starting out to find her. When they did, the ringleader called out: "Yo, old lady, you gonna answer my question?" The old lady with the warmth and gentleness that characterizes so many of our elders said, "My son, I will try."

Holding the bird behind his back, the ringleader said, "Old lady, this bird that I hold behind my back, is it dead or is it alive?"

The old lady, taking her own sweet time, simply replied: "It's in your hands!"

Sisters and brothers all, that is the answer: The responsibility for bringing far greater diversity into each and every one of our museums is in *your* hands, and in mine.

## NOTES

1. Philip M. Katz and Elizabeth E. Merritt, *TrendsWatch 2013: Back to the Future*, Center for the Future of Museums Project (Arlington, VA: American Alliance of Museums, 2013): 9, <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/trendswatch2013.pdf>.

2. David Gelles, "Wooing a New Generation of Museum Patrons," *New York Times*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/arts/artsspecial/wooing-a-new-generation-of-museum-patrons.html>.