

The policies and atmosphere of the second Gilded Age

Metropolitan Museum of Art implements mandatory admission charge for non-New Yorkers

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City announced last week that as of March 1 it would institute a mandatory admission fee of \$25 for all visitors who don't live in the state of New York. Up to now, admission has been on a pay-as-you-wish basis, with \$25 being only a "suggested" amount. Under the new policy, the mandatory admission for out-of-state visitors will continue to be \$17 for those over the age of 65, and \$12 for students.

The new policy does not come as a complete surprise, following as it does reports last spring that some such change was in the offing. The Met has been running an annual deficit of more than \$10 million. Mounting financial problems contributed to the departure of the museum's director, Thomas P. Campbell, last year.

After months of behind-the-scenes consultations, the wealthy patrons on the Met's board of directors, headed by president and chief executive officer Daniel Weiss, concluded that maintaining a voluntary admission policy for New York City and state residents, while making it mandatory for all others, would make the change more palatable politically. The museum hopes to raise an additional \$6 to \$10 million annually.

As an additional concession, the Met administration announced that a single admission would be good for a three-day consecutive period at all three of the Met's locations, including the Met Breuer building (formerly the Whitney Museum on nearby Madison Avenue) and the Cloisters uptown in Washington Heights.

The argument that no New Yorkers will suffer and that out-of-state visitors can and should pay full price is simply foul. On the most immediate level, it creates an artificial distinction between residents of the city's five boroughs and those who live just across the Hudson River in the cities of Newark, Jersey City, Bayonne and many other parts of the tri-state metropolitan area, including nearby Connecticut.

Only students from New Jersey and Connecticut will continue to be granted voluntary admission privileges.

The number of annual visitors to the Met has grown by about 50 percent in the last 12 years, to nearly seven million. At the same time, the average contribution has dropped precipitously, from 63 percent of the suggested figure to the current 17 percent. There are several factors behind this drop, none of which the Met administration has seen fit to acknowledge.

First of all, the "suggested" amount has itself been raised substantially over this period. Of at least equal importance is the fact that the median income of the vast majority, including suburbanites often misleadingly labeled as "middle class," has stagnated or fallen since the financial crash of 2008.

The backers of mandatory admission claim that since visitors to the city already must set aside large sums for hotels and entertainment, demanding money to visit the world's art treasures is no great sacrifice. Another and more realistic view, however, is that after carefully budgeting to account for high prices everywhere else, families and individuals can ill afford the \$100 (for a family of four) that has up to now been suggested but will now become required. All of this means nothing to the top one-tenth of one percent, for whom \$100 is not even pocket change. Their arrogance is matched only by their ignorance of the actual world inhabited by those in the "lower orders."

The claim that New Yorkers are being granted special consideration in the new policy also encourages anti-immigrant sentiment. City and state residents will be required to produce identification to prove their "legality." This is sure to discourage both undocumented immigrants as well as many others who lack drivers' licenses or other typical forms of identification.

None of this prevented the de Blasio administration from

hailing the new change. “Having a healthy Met is extremely important to New York City,” said the city commissioner of cultural affairs Tom Finkelpearl. “The basic motivation was to help the Met balance its budget in a way that did not hurt New Yorkers.”

Local Democratic Party politicians, with demagogic and stupid provincialism, rushed to applaud the new policy on this basis as well. One City Council member said, “The Met can continue attracting visitors from around the world to our city, while keeping the doors open to everyone who calls New York home” - as if workers and young people in the rest of the New York City area, not to mention the rest of the country and the world, count for less.

The Met, as some observers quickly pointed out, is one of the three or four most comprehensive and renowned art museums in the world. The new policy sends the signal that, while its holdings come from all over the world, they will not be made available on the same basis to the descendants of the cultures that produced them!

The change in policy will in fact raise very little money. The current revenue of about \$42 million from admissions amounts to 14 percent of the total operating budget of \$305 million. This is expected to rise to \$50 million at most, or 16 to 17 percent of the budget.

Why then has the Met decided on this change? The purpose is not only to increase the museum’s immediate income stream, and not only to set a precedent for demanding across-the-board mandatory admissions in the future, but also to set another example - moving away from the idea that great art museums should be public resources available to all, and instead establishing and extending a precedent for the privatization of all public services and institutions.

Mandatory admission fees at the Met Museum are part and parcel of the atmosphere of the second Gilded Age, already far more extreme than the first, characterized by a gulf between the moneyed aristocracy and the vast majority unlike anything ever seen in the United States. The Met is located across the street from one of the wealthiest residential neighborhoods in the country and, in fact, the world, stretching several blocks to the east. The first thing visitors see as they approach the grand steps leading up to the entrance are the atrocious new fountains paid for by the right-wing oil and gas billionaire who contributed \$65 million to have his name plastered on what is now called the David H. Koch Plaza.

The brazenness of the latest move provoked dissent from the two chief art critics of the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith and Holland Cotter. As Smith explained, in a joint column with Cotter last week, “both Koch Plaza and the Met’s fixed admissions reflect something widespread: the

continual degrading and privatization of public space.”

The Koch Plaza is only one of countless examples of this privatization, which has also seen the treasured central branch of the New York Public Library renamed for hedge fund billionaire Stephen Schwarzman.

Smith pointed out the fallacy behind the argument that the Met’s change in policy is reasonable because it is the only major museum in the world without either mandatory admissions or massive state subsidies. “Their attitude is that all other museums charge one way or another...this is inevitable, and now we will too. Actually it should be just the opposite. Pay as you wish is a principle that should be upheld and defended, a point of great pride.”

Both Cotter and Smith, comparing museums to libraries, argue quite correctly that they should have universal free admission. Cotter even declares that “if this country had a government that cared about its citizens rather than one that catered to its economic ruling class, we might be able to live some version of this ideal [of free admission].” At the same time, reflecting the pessimism and confusion that is so widespread among the artistic intelligentsia today, the *Times* critics see no way to achieve this “ideal,” and quickly drop the subject. Rather than conceive of a government that represented the majority, Cotter proceeds to plead that the “economic ruling class, for its part, could, and should, contribute to an open-door cultural policy.”

The attacks on art and all other forms of culture highlight the need, not for appeals to the ruling class, but for a political struggle for socialist policies, the fight to free the resources that are being monopolized and stolen by the financial parasites on Wall Street and the hedge funds, a struggle that raises the need for revolutionary leadership and the socialist reorganization of society.



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