

# Coronavirus crisis “devastates” US museums, arts organizations, many of them for good

David Walsh  
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The bipartisan corporate “rescue” package passed by the US Congress this week provides only \$232.5 million for cultural organizations, one-sixteenth of the \$4 billion for which the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and individual institutions had lobbied.

Boeing alone will receive more than four times what the museum group had requested—and was denied. The Metropolitan Museum in New York expects to lose \$100 million should it remain closed through July and the American Museum of Natural History (also in New York) estimates it will lose \$60 million by June. The AAM asserted in a March 19 press release that museums in the US collectively are losing at least \$33 million a day due to closures related to COVID-19. Museums support some 726,000 jobs nationally, with 372,100 people directly employed by the institutions.

The aid package passed by the Senate and the House this week provides \$75 million each for the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), to be distributed as the respective organizations see fit. It also allocates \$50 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC—home to the National Symphony Orchestra and the Washington National Opera—is slated to receive \$25 million, while the Smithsonian Institution in Washington will get \$7.5 million.

In its press statement, the AAM explained that the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the museum field was “devastating.” The organization noted that museums “of all sizes are experiencing closures, attendance free-fall, canceled events, and layoffs.”

This would escalate day by day, the AAM argued, “as closures and cancellations continue.” It further stated, “Most of these are cash-based businesses; their economic lifeblood is people visiting.” It pointed to declines in both international and domestic tourism, declines in local

attendance and increases in social distancing. The AAM estimated that as a consequence of the current situation, “as many as 30 percent of museums, mostly in small and rural communities, will not re-open without significant and immediate emergency financial assistance.”

Thousands of museum employees, freelance workers and others have already lost their jobs. *ArtForum* points out that since galleries, museums and arts organizations closed down earlier this month “with no idea when they can reopen, job losses were inevitable.” It continued: “Some museums, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, plan on paying hourly and part-time workers through the closure. Some institutions, including The Broad in LA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, will only pay workers until a fixed date, when they will reassess their options. Other museums have already begun letting people go.”

*ArtForum* goes on to explain that in anticipation of “large revenue losses, museums are also implementing pay cuts and furloughing workers.” It states, “Employees who cannot work remotely, including art handlers, installers, security guards, retail and front-desk workers, gallery attendants, and freelancers, are most vulnerable to losing their jobs.”

The Cleveland Museum of Art, anticipating five million dollars in lost revenue, will furlough all part-time staff and temporarily lay off a portion of its unionized staff, which includes security guards. The Hammer Museum, affiliated with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), has laid off 150 part-time student employees.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA) is laying off all of its part-time employees, a total of 97 workers, reports the *Los Angeles Times*. The layoffs, which the museum says are temporary due to the coronavirus crisis, include gallery attendants, exhibition installers, retail staff and education team members, among others.

Freelance workers employed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York are protesting the museum's decision not to pay "on-call" (freelance) employees for work they committed to after March 29, according to *Hyperallergic*. On-call workers are "casual hour employees," in the museum's phrase, who work when called in for specific projects.

One freelance worker explained in a moving tweet addressed to museum officials that this was "a terrible time to exclude people who earn their living at your institution from having basics for their families." The individual explained that she had committed to working on an exhibition for 22 days.

"I ask," she went on, "that you consider how not being paid the work already planned will affect my husband and two children for basic things like access to food and housing... Freelancers deserve income continuation. As a mother I am asking you to reconsider your decision."

The decision by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York to close its doors as of March 13, *ART news* reported, "came as a surprise to the organization's part-time workers, many of whom did not receive notice until the decision was made public around 7:30 p.m. [the night before]. 'There has been no clarity on payment,' said one gallery attendant, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation. 'There have been vague promises about compensation for the next few weeks, but it seems like they are playing it pretty safe.'"

Because of the closure of New York City's public schools, museum educators at the Whitney, who conduct student tours, have been informed they won't be paid after March 31, despite having contracts that last until May or June. One educator told *Hyperallergic*, "Our time was booked months in advance, with our schedules already planned till the end of June. Which means we won't be compensated after March."

Museums commonly hire educators as freelancers or contractors, writes *Hyperallergic*, "a step below even part-time employment, [which] adds to the precariousness of their condition. 'The vast majority of New York City's institutions employ their museum educators as contractors, meaning we're not eligible for unemployment benefits,' confirmed one teaching artist, who says she makes slightly under \$40,000 a year from various museum jobs. 'We're just a line item in the 'programming' budget.'"

Commercial art galleries in New York, Los Angeles and other major centers have also started furloughing workers. Elizabeth Dee, in a comment on *Artnet* that suggested

"We Don't Know What a Post-Coronavirus Art World Will Look Like," observed that "Our very way of life is under threat due to our over-leveraged health care system, the illness of colleagues and loved ones, and the economic hit experienced by countless sectors, including the art industry. Freelance workers, who are essential to galleries and art fairs as well as many hospitality industries, have also been left without support."

*Artnet* added that "W, the art and culture magazine, furloughed all but a skeleton crew of people to maintain its website, and restaurateur Danny Meyer—who owns *Untitled* at The Whitney and *The Modern* at MoMA—laid off 80 percent of his staffers, nearly 2,000 people."

The art world has also begun to lose individuals to COVID-19. Vittorio Gregotti, the Italian urban planner, writer and architect of the Barcelona Olympic Stadium, died in mid-March from the coronavirus. Art historian and critic Maurice Berger and architect and critic Michael Sorkin have also died from the disease.

The end result of the current wave of closures, layoffs and cutbacks will be the further concentration of arts institutions, with a relative handful of well-endowed and well-patronized museums "prospering," while many others go under.

Significantly, the AAM in its press statement also pointed to the fact that in addition to "losses in earned revenue and unremitted expenses," its member institutions were "expecting lost charitable contributions as donors reassess their capacity to give due to the stock market's volatility."

The reductions in already miserly government subsidies to the arts organizations in recent decades and their increasing reliance on wealthy benefactors has created a situation where the continued existence of institutions in many cases depends on the "generosity" or whims of multimillionaires and billionaires.

The US government spends a pittance on culture. The current budget for the National Endowment of the Arts, on which thousands of organizations rely, is \$162,250,000, while the US war machine is funded to the tune of \$738 billion.



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