

Veteran curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum latest to come under racist attack

Institution accused of “white supremacy and culture of systemic racism”

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The racist attack launched against Keith Christiansen, the John Pope-Hennessy Chairman of European Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, for his remarks concerning the danger of valuable art works being destroyed in the course of upheavals is without any merit whatsoever.

It is another expression of the desperate and pathological race obsession sweeping layers of the American upper middle class. Not to mince words: in this direction lie book- and painting-burning—and not so terribly far in the future.

The denunciations of Christiansen, who has been at the museum since 1977, publicized and promoted by the *New York Times*, came in response to an Instagram post he shared on June 19, which seemed to reference the recent tearing down of various statues and monuments by protesters.

The post has been removed, but, according to the *Times*, beneath “a pen-and-ink image of the French archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir,” who worked to save France’s historic monuments from the excesses of the French Revolution, Christiansen wrote, “Alexandre Lenoir battling the revolutionary zealots bent on destroying the royal tombs in Saint Denis. How many great works of art have been lost to the desire to rid ourselves of a past of which we don’t approve.”

“And how grateful we are to people like Lenoir,” the curator added, “who realized that their value—both artistic and historical—extended beyond a defining moment of social and political upheaval and change.”

Christiansen, as he subsequently explained, was primarily concerned with “the losses that occur to a fuller understanding of a complicated and sometimes ugly past” when major works of art are destroyed by “war, iconoclasm, revolution and intolerance.” He merely wanted to remind people that with the destruction of great works of art, there was a loss of testimony “to complex and sometimes even ugly histories.”

Neither should anyone be diverted by confusion over the history of the French Revolution. In fact, Alexandre Lenoir was fully a figure of the tumultuous epoch, a man who had his portrait painted by Jacques-Louis David, the preeminent artist of the Revolution. Lenoir was instrumental in establishing the Musée des monuments français [Museum of French Monuments] in 1795 and remained its

director for 30 years. At the time of the restoration of the monarchy in 1816, he was obliged to return most of the museum’s collection to its aristocratic owners.

More generally, “it was the French Revolution,” as one historian has explained, with its “egalitarianism,” that “decisively put art into the public domain,” including of course through the creation of the Louvre in Paris, the largest and most visited art museum in the world. Likewise, the outcome of the Civil War provided the impetus for the establishment of art and science museums in the US.

In any event, Christiansen’s post was criticized in a tweet by a group claiming to advocate for arts and museum workers, Art + Museum Transparency. The group wrote to the Metropolitan Museum, alleging that “one of your most powerful curators suggested that it’s a shame we’re trying to ‘rid ourselves of a past of which we don’t approve’ by removing monuments—and, worse, making a dog whistle of an equation of #BLM [Black Lives Matter] activists with ‘revolutionary zealots.’ This is not OK.”

Along the same lines, a group of 15 Met staff members addressed a letter to museum officials: “All of us were angered that the post seemed to equate Black Lives Matter protesters with ‘revolutionary zealots’—a position made crueler by its posting on Juneteenth.” The same staff members urged the museum to acknowledge “what we see as the expression of a deeply rooted logic of white supremacy and culture of systemic racism at our institution.”

It certainly is a gross misunderstanding to confuse, for example, those individuals responsible for tearing down statues of Lincoln, Grant and other antislavery figures, along with Washington and Jefferson, with “revolutionary zealots”—“communist reactionaries” would be closer to the truth, but that is a secondary issue.

The claim that Christiansen’s post expressed the “deeply rooted logic of white supremacy and culture of systemic racism at our institution” is both libelous and preposterous. He was issuing a general warning, as we have noted, about the risks for art involved in convulsive events.

In fact, the response of his detractors bears almost no relationship to the content of Christiansen’s comments. At play

here is an effort to paint any criticism, even of the most oblique or misinterpreted kind, of communalist politics or actions as “racist.” Just as anti-Stalinist critics in the 1930s were denounced as “anti-Soviet” and opponents of Zionism are today automatically labeled “anti-Semitic,” so too now any voices raised against (or thought to be raised against) “Black Lives Matter activists” will be conveniently lumped in with those of “white supremacists.”

Christiansen is a distinguished figure in the art and museum world. During his tenure at the Metropolitan he has organized numerous significant exhibitions, including *Painting in Renaissance Siena, 1420–1500*; *Andrea Mantegna*; *The Renaissance Portrait From Donatello to Bellini*; *Giambattista Tiepolo, 1696–1770*; *El Greco in New York*; *The Age of Caravaggio*; *Jusepe de Ribera 1591–1652* and *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions*. In addition, he has written widely on Italian painting and taught at Columbia University and the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. His published work on art history is extensive and impressive.

None of that means anything to the know-nothings who have undertaken to smear him.

Predictably, museum officials were immediately frightened and cowed by the various attacks on Christiansen. It is depressing and discouraging to cite the comments by individuals who could not stand up to a swarm of gnats. One blathered that “no doubt” the museum and its development was “also connected with a logic of what is defined as white supremacy.” The Metropolitan’s “ongoing efforts to not only diversify our collection but also our programs, narratives, contexts and staff will be further accelerated and will benefit in urgency and impact from this time,” etc. Comments that are as unconvincing as they are formulaic.

Christiansen also apologized, although much of the apology consisted of an attempt to make clear what he had actually said and meant.

The *Times*, of course, rubbed its hands over the whole mess. Having interpreted Christiansen as “saying monuments should be protected from ‘zealots,’” the newspaper gloated over the fact his comments had “prompted staff charges that the museum fosters ‘a culture of systemic racism.’”

There is not the slightest evidence that “white supremacy” and unbridled racism reign supreme at the Metropolitan Museum or any other leading art institution in America. The relatively small percentage of African American staff members and officials at art museums is, above all, a class question, the result of social oppression. The black population, overwhelmingly working-class, is largely excluded from the art world by the fact that the working class as a whole is denied access to culture by capitalist society. The relentless, decades-long evisceration of public and arts education has only worsened matters.

The image painted of the art museum as a bastion of “white male privilege” is false, at any rate. The percentage of women employees in art museums in 2018 was 61 percent, and the percentage of women in museum leadership was even higher, 62 percent. Meanwhile, according to the Mellon Foundation, in 2018, “35 percent of new hires at U.S. museums ... were people of color, compared with 26 percent in 2015, bringing the figure more closely in line with nationwide demographics.”

Those attacking Christiansen have no interest in the conditions or needs of wide layers of the black or female population. They are deeply selfish petty bourgeois, with their hearts set on a larger share of the wealth, including the highest-paying positions.

It is not for nothing that the group of complaining Met staff members commented that while “a private Instagram account does not necessarily reflect the views of the institution for which Christensen works—our Met—his position of power within it, and the decision-making he affects as a department head and senior curator with regard to programming, staff hiring, and institutional direction, is more to our point.”

Money, money, money.

Why stop with silencing or, if possible, driving Christiansen out? How long will it be before the art hung on the walls of the Metropolitan requires reevaluation and “diversifying”? Why not a racial or gender quota system, applied retroactively? The overrated work of innumerable “white artists” might be sold off or even make for a bonfire? The reader may scoff, but the foul logic of racial-ethnic politics is absolutely inescapable. And, as the poet Heine presciently argued, “Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people.”

Too many of those involved in this case or in the art and museum community as a whole may be intimidated by the “New Right” of racialists and the identity politics industry generally. We Marxists are not. We are not afraid of expressing our repugnance for the racialization of politics, for the attempt to divert what began as mass protests against police killings into orgies of ethno-communalism.

Nothing terrifies the American ruling elite more than the vision of a united struggle waged by the black, white, Latino and immigrant working-class population and more farsighted sections of artists and intellectuals. That fright, through various means, communicates itself to affluent layers of the middle class where it is translated, sometimes adorned with “left” phrases, into racial and gender politics, politics aimed at diverting, disorienting and paralyzing the seething popular anger and preserving the economic and social status quo.

The answer to the racist filth is the socialist critique of the existing social order and the growth of its influence among workers and the most oppressed.



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