

One-third of US museums might close in 12 months, American Alliance of Museums warns

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On February 22-23, Museum Advocacy Day, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) issued a statement warning that one-third of US museums were at risk “of shuttering permanently within the next twelve months without immediate financial support.” That would mean, the AAM indicated, the loss of 12,000 museums and 124,000 jobs.

The Biden administration, although it may pay lip service to concerns about the situation, will essentially continue to implement the policy pursued by Democratic and Republican governments at every level for decades: “malign neglect” toward arts and culture. The bankrupting of thousands of arts organizations and the expulsion of tens of thousands of musicians, actors, dancers, visual artists and others from the field of their choice during the COVID-19 pandemic go hand in hand with the fabulous enrichment of a handful of plutocrats.

The AAM figures are consistent with the organization’s earlier statements released in July and September 2020.

Laura Lott, AAM President and CEO, commented recently, “While the museum field received record levels of support from the federal government in the past 12 months, the funding provided only temporary relief. Museum recovery will take years and without a sustained Congressional lifeline, I fear that many museums will be lost forever.” Lott has argued that the permanent closure of the 12,000 museums would be “devastating for communities, economies, education systems, and our cultural history.”

In November, she pointed out that the “financial state of U.S. museums” was moving “from bad to worse.” Lott noted at the time that “30 percent of museums remain closed since the March lockdown and those that have reopened are operating on an average of 35 percent of their regular attendance—a reduction that is unsustainable long-term. Those that did safely serve their communities this summer do not have enough revenue to offset higher costs, especially during a potential winter lockdown.”

In October, Seattle-based Wilkening Consulting—on behalf of the AAM—found that, on average, individual museums had lost about \$850,000 in revenue in 2020 due to the pandemic. Museum directors on average anticipated losing the equivalent of 35 percent of their annual operating income by the end of the year.

A spokeswoman for the consulting firm asserted that the current situation was “not sustainable, especially when over half of museums have less than six months of financial savings left to survive.”

In November, more than half of responding institutions in the US reported to the AAM having to furlough or lay off staff. The museums indicated that approximately 30 percent of their staff were currently out of work. The positions most affected by job losses included frontline (68 percent), education (40 percent), security/maintenance (29 percent) and collections staff (26 percent). The AAM argues that museums in the US support 726,000 direct and indirect jobs.

While museums in most locales are now open, attendance is sharply down and the institutions have taken the opportunity in many cases to reduce staff and wages, permanently if possible. In late August, for example, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) imposed a 20 percent cut on all staff salaries. Critics pointed out there was a considerable difference in the impact of such a reduction on executives earning \$400,000 a year and workers making \$20 an hour.

The Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art announced in October it was cutting 31 percent of staff. Columbus executive director Nannette Maciejunes told the *Columbus Dispatch*, “We did everything we could for seven months. ... But what has crushed us is that we get a full third of our revenue from earned income.” She said attendance at the time was hovering at about 25 percent to 30 percent of the normal figure, which Maciejunes said “seems to be about the national average, in talking to my colleagues around the country.”

Last month, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA) eliminated some 11 percent of its staff, citing financial losses generated by the pandemic. *Hyperallergic* reported that, like other institutions across the US, “the MCA shuttered in March 2020 to help contain the spread of the virus and reopened its doors in August. Thanks in part to a \$2 million forgivable loan from the Paycheck Protection Program, it had avoided layoffs of its full-time staff until now, and continued to pay full- and part-time staff during the first four-month period of closure.”

A similar story is being repeated, to one extent or another, at hundreds, if not thousands, of museums and other cultural organizations.

The miserably low level of government support in the US makes its smaller and “weaker” museums, i.e., those not enjoying the beneficence of one or more billionaires, especially vulnerable, but the process is a global one.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) reported in May, in an initial study, that “a dire situation” faced museums and museum professionals around the world. Ninety-five percent of the world’s institutions closed down in response to the outbreak of the pandemic.

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Based on information gathered in September and October, the ICOM reported that “16.2 percent of respondents stated that at least a quarter of the museum staff had been laid off or furloughed between February and September 2020 following the COVID-19 crisis, a figure that rises to *more than half* of the personnel for 10.6 percent of participants.” (Emphasis added.)

The ICOM noted that the situation for freelance museum professionals had slightly improved since April, but remained “alarming.” Among the freelance respondents, 10.7 percent said they had been temporarily laid off, and 16 percent had not had their contracts renewed. The study observed that the “freelance and consultancy sector is very fragile.” Nearly 41 percent (40.9 percent) of the respondents stated that they would have to suspend the payment of their own salary as a result of the crisis, and 28.9 percent said their employers would have to reduce the number of staff. Appallingly, some 27.5 percent of freelance museum professionals were “considering changing their career entirely.”

Nearly 13 percent of the world’s museums indicated they might have to close for good because of the consequences of the pandemic, and nearly one-third of them planned to reduce staff. The ICOM study reported that “82.6 percent of the respondents anticipate that museum programmes will have to be reduced and 29.8 percent expect that the number of staff will have to be reduced.”

German broadcaster Deutsche Welle reported recently that the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the home “of masterpieces by Dutch Golden Age painters such as Rembrandt and Johannes Vermeer,” had “two million fewer physical visitors in 2020.”

The Louvre in Paris, the most visited museum in the world, experienced a 75 percent drop in visitors in 2020, “especially travellers from remote countries like China and US.” The Louvre is predicted “to have lost around 90 million euros in revenue last year.”

According to the ICOM, the pandemic-induced museum closures will have a particularly devastating impact on those regions “where museums are recent and few and where structures are still fragile: in African, Asian and the Arab countries 24, 27 and 39 percent respectively fear that museums may close,” compared to “only” 12 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 10 percent in North America and 8 percent in Europe.

In this arena too, the coronavirus pandemic is accelerating and amplifying already existing trends. The various statistics add up to increased social misery for hundreds of thousands of arts workers and a further and sustained attack on the ability of wide layers of the population to have access to art, history, science and culture generally.

On several occasions, Lott of the AAM has repeated a similar notion: “There is no financial safety net for many museums.” This is perfectly true, but Lott, one suspects, takes this entirely for granted. But *why* is this so? Why, in fact, is there no “safety net” for museums, schools, hospitals and every other institution critical to the population’s physical or spiritual well-being, whereas Wall Street parasites and financial sharks are cushioned from suffering losses and showered with cash to the tune of trillions of dollars? Ay, there’s the rub.



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