Museum workers worldwide lose jobs, income—many plan to leave field

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On April 13, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) made public the findings of a survey, "Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field," conducted in March. Some 2,700 individuals responded, 87 percent of them (pre-pandemic) museum staff in the US.

Unsurprisingly, the results paint a picture of economic hardship, professional uncertainty and mental turmoil. The more precarious a given respondent's position in the field, generally speaking, the greater the financial loss (as a percentage of previous income) and the deeper the skepticism about the future.

Forty-three percent of museum workers as a whole saw their income fall by an average of 31 percent over the course of 2020. More than 60 percent of part-time staff, already living at poverty levels, testify to "having lost income due to the pandemic, with a median of eight thousand dollars lost due to reduced salary, benefits, or hours for a median reduction of 50 percent." Independent contractors have also been hard hit—78 percent of individuals in that category lost income last year, according to the AAM study, "at a median of twenty-five thousand dollars, the equivalent of about 50 percent of pre-pandemic income."

Only 57 percent of respondents are "cautiously optimistic about the future of the museum sector," while 28 percent are "somewhat pessimistic." Just over one-fifth of paid staff and students "think it is unlikely they will be working in the sector in three years, with some of the biggest barriers being compensation, burnout, and a lack of opportunities for advancement."

The survey also warns "of a second pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic: the current and delayed impacts on mental health including rising anxiety and depression." The museum workers report "a grave toll on their mental health and wellbeing from the pandemic." The authors observe that the respondents reveal "a deep care for one another," underscoring "the compassion and empathy that exists among the people that make up the museum field." Despite personal adversity, those surveyed indicate their greatest shared concern is "for the wellbeing of colleagues."

The museum field, like every other sphere of public life, is a class battleground. While staff members and freelancers alike struggle to keep their heads above water, or abandon the field altogether, museum board members and top officials exist in another economic and social realm.

Museums in the US, both private and ostensibly public, are held especially tightly in the grip of the wealthy. On the eve of the pandemic, the *New York Times* published a column by Michael Massing, a writer and former executive editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, headlined "How the Superrich Took Over the Museum World" (December 14, 2019).

Massing pointed to the preponderance of the extremely wealthy, for example, on the board of trustees of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, noting that 45 out of 51 trustees "work in finance, the corporate world, real estate or law, or are the heirs or spouses of the superrich." He added that MoMA's "dependence on the kindness of billionaires comes at a price. Today's museum world is steeply hierarchical, mirroring the inequality in society at large."

The column noted that in 2018, "MoMA received a paltry $22,000 in government funds (from New York City), compared with the $136 million it got from private sources. In fact, MoMA does not seek or receive federal or state funding."

The influence of the billionaires on every aspect of museum operations is already immense. Massing indicated his "most serious concern" in regard to "baronial boards," the "possible constraints they place on what museums can exhibit." In the face of the pandemic, with museums and other arts institutions now under greater stress and in more financial need than ever, the role of the corporate oligarchy can only grow larger and more oppressive.

COVID-19 has deepened processes well under way: the subordination of the interests and needs of artists, museum staff and the population's own cultural wellbeing to the whims and vagaries of the financial oligarchy. The situation is increasingly untenable.

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The situation may be most pronounced in certain regards in the US, but the museum crisis is a global one.

A recent study from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Museums around the world in the face of COVID-19," highlighted the disastrous condition of museum attendance and funding worldwide.

The UNESCO report explained that even for those institutions, out of a global total of 104,000, "that remained open with sanitary measures in place, the drastic decrease in world tourism resulted in a drop in attendance of 70 percent." The revenues of the various institutions (especially the national museums) "decreased between 40 percent and 60 percent in comparison to the revenues from 2019," and "the situation for museums will remain very difficult this year."

The "financial consequences for the museum sector," UNESCO argued, with some degree of understatement, have been "considerable."

For its part, the *Art Newspaper* 's annual survey of museum attendance, published March 30, found that overall attendance in 2020 at "the world's 100 most-visited art museums dropped by a staggering 77 percent in 2020—from 230 million in 2019 to just 54 million as museums worldwide were forced to close." Resorting to the same adjective once more, the survey revealed that museums "were shut for a staggering 41,000 days in total—more than a century's worth of visits missed last year."

The publication cited some of the particulars. The Louvre in Paris, the world's most widely visited art museum, experienced a 72 percent decline in attendance in 2020, losing 90 million euros ($US 108 million) in the process. The number of visitors to the National Museum of China fell by 78 percent, while attendance at the Tate Modern in London dropped by 77 percent, at the Vatican Museums by 81 percent, at the British Museum by 80 percent, at the State Russian Museum by 50 percent and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York by 83 percent.

"The steep decline in footfall," the *Art Newspaper* observed, "contributed to huge financial losses. The self-generated income of the Tate's four museums fell from £94m [$US 131 million] in the 2019/20 financial year to an estimated £38m for 2020/21, a 60 percent drop. Similarly, the Victoria and Albert Museum [in London] saw a 63 percent loss of income, with its self-generated funds falling from £64m to £24m."

New York's "four art behemoths," the Metropolitan Museum, MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, received 2.2 million visitors in 2020, as opposed to 11 million the year before. The Metropolitan alone lost an estimated $150 million.

The *Art Newspaper* disclosed that data from 19 Brazilian institutions surveyed indicated that the museums "were closed for an average of 203 days last year, which is more than any other country in our report."

The potential consequences of such figures for the future of the globe's cultural institutions and their workers are also "staggering."

It would be a serious mistake to imagine that the end of the pandemic, whenever that may come, will return art museums and galleries to their previous condition. The demands for greater and greater "sacrifice" on the part of museum workers and staff will continue.

The contention of organizations such as Museum Workers Speak that enrolling museum workers in the SEIU or AFL-CIO member unions will improve their conditions and lives is false and dangerous. Workers will painfully discover that such organizations are merely an arm of management determined to suppress every one of their struggles.

Equally false and dangerous is the obsession of such groups with racial politics. The notion that the central problem facing museum workers is the legacy "of colonial and racialized violence, and white supremacy broadly" in "disproportionately white and white-led institutions," as Museum Workers Speak claims, is utterly pernicious and the greatest possible gift to the ruling elite. The stranglehold of the billionaires and multimillionaires over cultural life will not be broken as long as capitalism exists. Ending that stranglehold depends on the firmest unity of the working class on a principled, socialist basis.

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