

Museum workers, identity politics and class

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The Mellon Foundation recently released its *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2022*. It is consumed with questions of race and gender, the obsession of the upper middle class.

The Mellon is the 28th wealthiest charitable foundation in the world, with an endowment of \$6.2 billion. Its ultimate source lies in the riches accumulated by banker and industrialist Andrew Mellon (1855-1937), one of America's robber barons and Secretary of the Treasury at the time of the 1929 Wall Street Crash. Like others of its type, the foundation, in the final analysis, pursues issues and funds projects aligned with the interests of the US corporate establishment.

The Mellon's current president, Elizabeth Alexander, in her foreword to the survey, argues that given "their unique role in our society, art museums must reflect the demographics of our richly diverse country."

Alexander takes it for granted and assumes her readers will too that "demographics" simply refers to race and gender. In fact, the vast majority of the American population depend on a wage, and thereby belong to the working class.

Moreover, tens of thousands of those workers are employed by museums and other cultural institutions.

Museum workers have experienced a nightmarish few years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Job and income loss has been enormous. Many have left the profession. Those remaining face high levels of financial and psychological insecurity, with institutions everywhere attempting to place as much as possible of the burden of their economic difficulties on the workers' backs. On top of everything else, inflation is now eating up wages.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), employment at "museums, historical sites, and similar institutions" stood at 174,300 in December 2019.

The conditions produced by the pandemic, above all, the temporary closure of many institutions, led to a sharp drop in that figure, to 125,600 in April 2020 (from 172,200 the month before) and to 121,300 by July of that year. From the previous December's high point, the July 2020 numbers represented a loss of 53,000 jobs, or 30 percent of the workforce. By November 2022, the BLS calculates that employment has climbed back to 164,600 (the equivalent of 2017 levels), still a 6 percent decline from three years earlier, or 9,700 jobs.

In March 2021, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) made public their findings as to the "Impact of COVID-19 on

People in the Museum Field." The AAM estimated that 43 percent of museum workers as a whole saw their income fall by an average of 31 percent over the course of 2020, or \$21,191 per worker. Some 13 percent were living paycheck to paycheck.

More than 60 percent of part-time staff, already living at poverty levels, testified to "having lost income due to the pandemic, with a median of \$8,000 lost due to reduced salary, benefits, or hours for a median reduction of 50 percent." Independent contractors had also been hard hit—78 percent of individuals in that category lost income in 2020, according to the AAM study, "at a median of \$25,000 dollars, the equivalent of about 50 percent of pre-pandemic income."

How many hundreds of millions of dollars were lost in total income? How long will it take workers to recover from that cut in earnings, if they ever do?

The BLS jobs figures do not reveal how many full-time jobs have been replaced by part-time or other types of insecure employment. (One indication, however, is provided by the AAM's finding in April 2021 that 14 percent of museums responding to a survey indicated "they had or would make more use of contract labor in place of in-house staff, while only 2 percent indicated they would use less contract labor in place of in-house staff.")

In the face of these painful and pressing conditions, museum workers have turned to various means of attempting to defend themselves. Unsurprisingly, trade unions desperate for dues-paying members have put themselves forward as the solution. Workers at numerous institutions have signed up with AFSCME, the UAW and other unions in recent years.

However, as the results of the recent 19-day strike at the Philadelphia Museum of Art reveal, this route provides no way out of the present crisis situation. The leadership of AFSCME Local 397 ended the Philadelphia walkout without the members seeing the details or voting on the contract (which was eventually ratified). The union agreed to a contract providing for a 14 percent increase in pay over the next three years. With the annual inflation rate in the US currently running at approximately 8 percent, this amounts to a pay cut of 10 percent or so by the end of the contract.

In any event, the Mellon Foundation doesn't pretend to pay attention to the circumstances of museum workers. That's very much to the point here. There is an unbridgeable class divide in

this social sphere as in every other.

The Mellon is preoccupied with and addressing itself to the affluent middle class that makes up the “museum leadership” and reporting on the state of the quasi-ethnic-and-gender-cleansing operations going on in that particular arena.

After arguing that cultural institutions must reflect the “demographics” of the US, as noted above, Alexander, in her foreword, falls back on the usual jargon. She refers to art museums struggling “to hire a workforce equitably represented in race and gender.” We know, she asserts, “people of color are less likely to feel welcome in museums than those who are White. We know historical collecting practices have favored the art and cultural works of men of European descent.”

In fact, making art museums more “welcoming” to working class audiences of every ethnicity depends very much on a radical change in the economic and political system. Workers are cut off by bourgeois society from access to culture in general (“the very reason,” Leon Trotsky pointed out, they are “forced to overthrow” that society), but the American ruling elite in particular has devoted the last several decades to eviscerating whatever opportunities for such access previously existed.

As museum workers have confronted upheavals in their lives, the Mellon Foundation study shows that the upper echelons in the art cultural world have grown “more diverse.” The data “show a continued, moderate increase in people of color (POC) across all museum roles.” While museum leadership and conservation positions, although “growing more diverse,” still “have not exceeded one-fifth POC representation overall,” more than “40 percent of younger staff and newer hires are POC,” the survey says.

Fewer than one-fifth of “intellectual leadership positions” were held by “POC in this category eight years ago. Since then, the field has seen continued progress in the diversification of these positions; POC staff now represent 27 percent of intellectual leadership positions among respondents.”

Revealingly, the survey notes that while “there has not been a significant increase in Black staff in the aggregate, between 2015 and 2022, the number of Black staff in museum leadership has more than doubled, while tripling in information technology and quadrupling in curatorial positions.” Moreover, we learn, that “Hispanic and Asian curators have roughly doubled in total numbers since 2015, and Black curators have increased in total numbers fourfold since 2015.”

As for “gender ratios,” across “intellectual leadership positions in the museum, female employees constitute a large majority, over 75 percent. The representation of female employees in museum leadership has increased substantially, from 58 percent in 2015 to 66 percent in 2022.”

Overall, “Museum leadership and conservation positions, which saw very little progress toward diversification in the 2018 cycle of the survey, have become ‘unstuck’ and grown 7 percentage points more diverse over the past four years.”

Again, this is more or less the same period during which museum workers have undergone systematic attacks on their jobs and living standards. *On this basis alone*, it becomes entirely impossible to identify racial and gender “diversity” with social progress or as a left-wing cause. It is demonstrably the selfish drive of the aspiring affluent petty bourgeois.

The Mellon survey loses itself in the most exotic, painstaking examinations of the museum officialdom by department, ethnicity, gender, age group, “Year of Hire and Retention” and so forth. The section on “Museum Directors’ Attitudes Toward Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion” points to the growth in the pressure of identity politics on cultural life. The percentage of museum directors who report “valuing and engaging” in “diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion” (DEAI) *tripled* from the 2020 survey to the one two years later. The word is out, so to speak.

Much of the report will be tedious to those not caught up in the struggle for their own advancement and income, and therefore anxious to check up on the state of the processes involved.

The drive for “diversity” is a focal point in many cultural areas now, whether it be the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Hollywood, virtually every major film festival on the planet, music education, art history, etc.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has argued a number of times, this is not *genuine*, i.e., *social* diversity, it simply involves opening up a given field to individuals from the same social background, with many of the same petty bourgeois prejudices and limitations, but who happen to be female or have a different national or racial background. Nothing positive is accomplished thereby, other than building up the bank accounts of the newly included social layers, but the exercise is useful for the ruling class in diverting attention from social inequality, poverty, war and the threat of authoritarian rule.

The Mellon report remains silent on what one would think are critical questions raised by such a sweeping development as the sharp or steady increase in racial and gender “inclusion” – again, one that supposedly has “progressive” connotations. (Film festivals and other institutions are equally close-mouthed in regard to similar questions.) How has the growth in “diversity” opened up new possibilities for exhibiting art work? How has it helped encourage public appreciation of art and culture? What has it done to tackle the undeniable crisis of intellectual life in America, its serious cultural backwardness?

The survey does not address these matters as its political and class interests lie elsewhere.



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