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Unmaking the Met

by James Panero

On the past, present, and future of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art reopened to the public in late August. Those of us who lined up outside early shared a special sense of relief at its return. As goes the Met, so goes the metropolis. Since its founding in 1870 all the way up to March 2020, the museum had closed for at most only three consecutive days. The covid-19 pandemic kept it shuttered for six months. As spring turned to summer, the effects of this closure became palpable. The lockdown combined with social unrest to rock the foundations of our institutions. The Met's reopening therefore seemed to signal a restoration. It was a sign of resilience against a backdrop of unease.

Since the reopening, I am not the only one who has been unable to stay away. Time at the museum can do wonders for an otherwise crumbling sense of loss and dislocation. Each visit builds on the next. New discoveries add to familiar friends. I move from one room to the other across the landscape of time and space without any particular path or destination. Greek terracotta leads to the art of the Sahel, which deposits me with French portrait busts. German metal appears next to British glass. Italian armor opens up onto American nude sculpture. Head up and make a right at Robert Joyce's tall clock and land in the art of Kyoto. "What's the best way to get back to Egypt?" I ask a guard. "Go through Asia," she helpfully replies. Somewhere among Archaic art from Cyprus, I realize I have lost my bearings. At such a point, I consider my visit a success. I am exactly where I want to be.

Unlike any other institution, the Metropolitan is the museum of the metropolis. It is a city in the city, a cosmos for the cosmopolitan, expansive and uncontainable, a home for culture owned by no one person and belonging to all. "It feels like New York," my young son tells me after a recent visit. "It feels like we are back home." Not named for a single patron, or place, or style, the Met has achieved, beyond all expectation, the Enlightenment idea of the encyclopedic museum. It is about as close as you can get to that "ideal museum," as the founding trustee George Fisk Comfort described it in 1870, one that is "cosmopolitan in its character" presenting the "whole stream of art-history in all nations and ages." The Met set out to be "worthy of this great metropolis and of the

wide empire of which New York is the commercial center," the civic leader William Cullen Bryant declared at its inception. Through a history of dedicated leadership, dutiful scholarship, and astonishing private beneficence, such ambitions have been more than realized.

Five years ago, I spent a day traversing every room at the museum, checking off each room number as I went. It took seven hours and twenty thousand steps, or about ten miles of walking to visit all four-hundred-odd rooms. The experience took me to corners of the collection I would not otherwise think to see. I ended up gravitating to a hidden corridor with Egyptian Middle Kingdom objects from Lisht and Thebes. Far off in another room, I lingered in the Chinese Treasury with intimate works of the late Ming and Qing dynasties, including a wall of snuff bottles. In my mind, bits of Roman glass started to melt into the colorful assembly of American glassmaking in the visible storage at the other corner of the museum. With amazingly varied results, across its two million square feet of space, the Met puts on display a particular cultural equation. The nineteenth-century Viennese art historian Alois Riegl called it the *Kunstwollen*—a "will to art." What we find at the Met is a sum of humanity's creative urges.

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Today I seek out this urge with a greater sense of urgency. If 2020 has revealed anything, it is the contingent nature of seemingly permanent things. The Met is an ocean liner of culture, one that conveys the world to America's port. Over its history, the institution has more than proven its seaworthiness as a vessel that mostly stays true to course, not easily affected by prevailing winds or swamped by rogue waves. But even our mightiest institutions can take on water and list. Our institutions can also be easily scuttled from within, perhaps under the mistaken impression that they ride too high in the water, or simply that the ocean would be better off with a new addition to the sea floor.

The year 2020 was meant to be the Met's jubilee. With a season of planned festivities celebrating 150 years in existence, museum attendance might easily have exceeded the seven million visitors that pressed through its doors in 2019. An anniversary exhibition called "Making The Met, 1870–2020" was even set to open on March 30; its scholarly catalogue was already printed and in circulation by spring. Instead, the pandemic closures hit just days before this exhibition's gala preview. As weeks turned to months and riots hit the streets, there were moments when one wondered if our institutions would make it to 2021. The museum projected an annual shortfall of $150 million as it laid off 20 percent of its staff.

Now, just because the Metropolitan has reopened, this does not mean its operations have returned to normal. Visiting hours are more limited. Curators and employees are still largely forbidden from returning to their offices. Thanks to timed tickets and the requirements of social distancing, the museum's galleries are often now mercifully unpopulated when open. At the same time, with the spigot of foreign tourism clamped shut, the turnstile revenue on which the Met has grown ever

more dependent may not return for some time.

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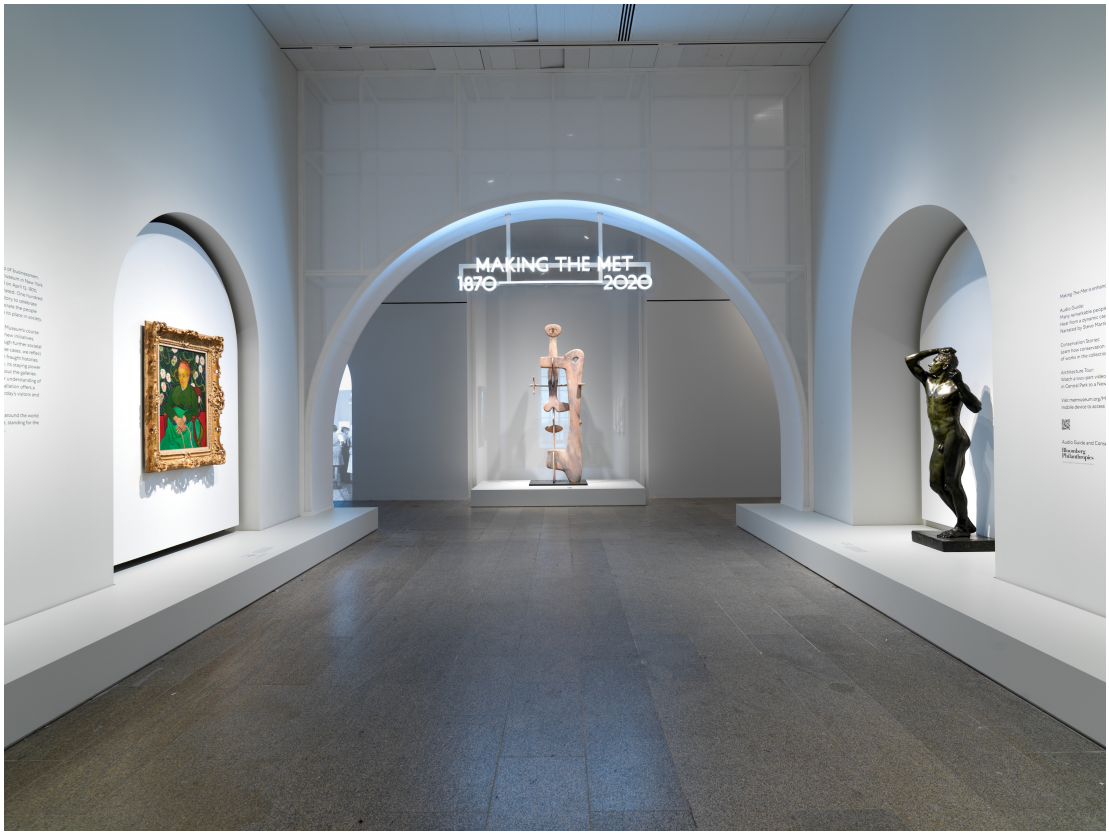
But beyond the economic losses and the interruptions of the pandemic, a cloud of doubt now hangs over the institution. There has never been a moment of lower confidence in American museums than now. Against a backdrop of alarming cultural convulsions, the Met has not shown itself immune to political upheavals. In recent years our great public treasure house has presented its abundance as an embarrassment of riches. Now its hand-wringing, false confessions, and aesthetic effacements have begun to cast a pall over the very idea of its encyclopedic mission.

The question now is whether the obsessions of the moment will continue to undermine the institution. Or will present realities inspire a reaffirmation of the museum's resolve as a solid foundation in shifting sands? The anniversary season and its anniversary exhibition, now finally available to view, should encourage us to take stock of the museum's historical achievements in even sharper relief.1 We should also consider whether this fraught year represents a temporary bump in the museum's history or an inflection point in its upward trajectory.

On its anniversary, what is most remarkable about the Met is not its old age but its relative youth. At a mere one hundred and fifty years old, the museum is a surprisingly modern creation. Because it presents the full history of art across a complex of buildings designed in a wide range of architectural styles, the museum can feel many millennia older. That it was all created not by the actions of church or state but through private contributions is an even more unusual achievement in the history of culture.



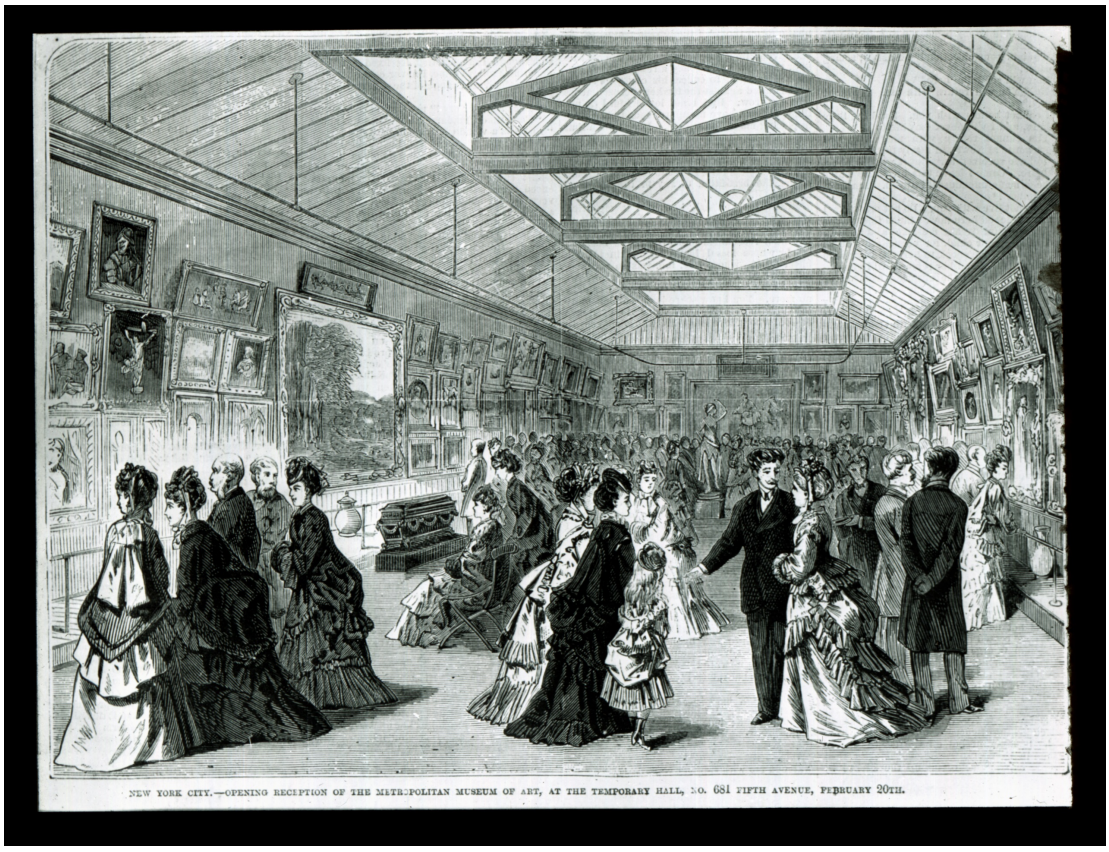
Installation view, "Making The Met, 1870–2020," at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

With 250 works from the collection presented in a rather overworked display, "Making The Met" requires repeated viewing. The extensive exhibition catalogue ably complements its representative objects and helps to fill out the storyline. Of course, the history of the Metropolitan is best told in full, across its sprawling Fifth Avenue campus as well as its ethereal Cloisters in northern Manhattan, with its collection of Medieval art and architecture. The anniversary show, organized by Andrea Bayer and Laura D. Corey, nevertheless does well to feature the leaders, architects, and especially the benefactors who, indeed, "made the Met." The exhibition leads us to look at the permanent collection in a new light. One place to start is the bequest name and accession date for each work on view. After all, not one of the 1.5 million objects now in the museum originated in its permanent collection. Nor was that grand Fifth Avenue edifice a foregone conclusion when civic-minded men called out for a new museum in the efflorescence of American spirit that followed the conclusion of the Civil War. They made it all out of nothing, and they gave it to us.

The immediate post-war period saw the founding of encyclopedic museums in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago in rapid succession. New York's iteration began at a Fourth of July party at Le Pré Catelan in Paris celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. "It was time for the American people to lay the foundation of a National Institution and Gallery of Art," the New York attorney John Jay, the grandson of the first Chief Justice of the United States, urged his assembled countrymen in 1866. They formed a group on the spot to do just that. Back in New York in 1869 at the Union League Club, where Jay was president, he tasked its Art Committee to rally the city's other civic associations to the cause of

forming an “amply endowed, thoroughly constructed art institution, free alike from bungling government officials and from the control of a single individual.”

It helped that an eastern quadrant of Central Park, hemmed in by two reservoirs and two crosstown transverses and originally intended as a parade ground, had recently been set aside for a museum in Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s “Greensward Plan” of 1857. As the Met was granted this parcel of park land for its new private museum in the public trust, Vaux and a third park designer, Jacob Wrey Mould, planned the museum’s first building in the very center of this location.



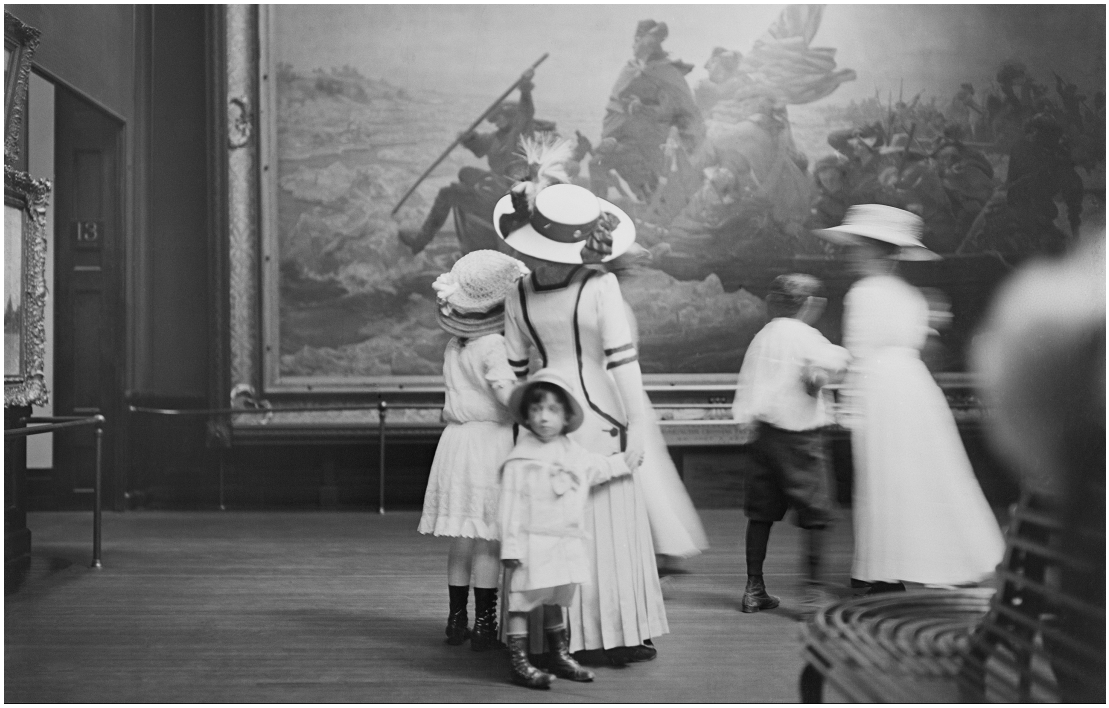
The opening reception for the Metropolitan Museum of Art on February 20, 1872. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art .

From the start, the museum’s facilities proved to be insufficient for its ambitions. The Gothic Revival design of the original wing, later called “Building A” and now the Medieval Court, was deemed outmoded even by the time of its opening in 1880 under the Met’s first director, Luigi Palma di Cesnola, a colonel in the Civil War and a former American consul to Cyprus. The many subsequent expansions of the Met then grew out of this central core building, just as the arrondissements of Paris spiraled out, nautilus-shaped, from the premier of the Louvre, eventually surrounding it. In 1888 Theodore Weston covered Building A’s southern face with a classical addition. In 1902 Richard Morris Hunt added his grand Beaux-Arts entrance to the east, facing Fifth Avenue; over the following fifteen years McKim, Mead & White extended Hunt’s street line to the northern and southern extent of the plot’s original designation. Since 1908, a century of infill has completed McKim’s master plan, in scope if not in style. Initiated by the board president C.

Douglas Dillon and the director Thomas Hoving, a 1970 revision by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates eventually sealed the museum envelope to the north, west, and south in a rectangle of concrete and glass. As the museum has reached the limits of its footprint granted by the city, all new amendments are now made within this existing portfolio.

Rather than the unity we see in John Russell Pope's National Gallery of Art, the result at the Met has been a conglomeration of various architectural styles and meandering pathways that well reflects the confederation of departments making up the museum's durable curatorial foundations. Recent efforts have further revealed the evolution of the Met's design, such as the reuse of Weston's south façade for the interior wall of the Carroll and Milton Petrie European Sculpture Court of 1990 and the restoration of one of the original 1880 Victorian staircases in 1995. More evidence of the museum's own history appears in Vaux and Mould's pointed stone archways, which pop out of a wall in a second floor hallway and also lead on to the 1975 Lehman Wing. In 2008 the museum even repurposed the foundations of Hunt's 1902 grand staircase into a new crypt for Byzantine art.

As with this combination of styles, a constellation of benefactors, working with the museum's directors, has underwritten the Met's making and helped fulfill its encyclopedic ambitions. J. Pierpont Morgan was undoubtedly its brightest star when he became the museum president in 1904. His largesse funded the museum's Fifth Avenue expansions and added thousands of works to its treasury. He also underwrote, anonymously, its first archaeological excavations, which led to one of the most significant collections of Egyptian art in the world. In 1911 a cartoon in *Puck* magazine illustrated one aspect of Morgan's powers of attraction. In the depiction, Morgan can be seen straddling the globe above New York. As he holds up a magnet in the shape of a dollar sign, the world's treasures are conveyed across the ocean.



Visitors viewing George Washington Crossing the Delaware *by Emanuel Leutze in 1910. Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

A more charitable understanding would be to see this as an example of the great beneficence of capital in the service of culture, unlike those European collections created through the church, the state, or force of arms. "He was as unselfish with his treasures of art as he was with his fortune," stated the museum's memorial tribute to Morgan in 1913. "He believed that the happiness of a whole people can be increased through the cultivation of taste, and he strongly desired to contribute to that end among his own countrymen." Beyond attracting the "best of historical European culture" to his American museum, Morgan's charitable magnetism attracted more donors and dollars to the growing institution. "That a man known universally for his acumen in finance should devote both time and talent to the active administration of a museum of art placed such institutions on a new footing," Winifred Howe wrote in her 1946 history of the museum. "Other men of affairs decided that art was worthy of their attention, even their collecting, and the Museum deserving of their support."

"Making The Met" features some of these other supporters who made significant contributions to the history of the museum. The Met's board president Robert de Forest, along with his wife Emily, spearheaded the creation of the American Wing, which opened in 1924, with their own collection and funds, the first such expansion underwritten by donor initiative. The Rockefeller family has contributed over generations. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., created and gifted the Cloisters in 1938—a history of its own that deserves more attention in the anniversary survey. His son Nelson seeded the Met's collection of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas with a gift of three thousand works in 1969 and underwrote a new wing named in honor of his son Michael, who died while researching the art of the Asmat people of Indonesia. Jacob S. Rogers was a steam locomotive manufacturer who left his estate to the museum in 1901 for the creation of an acquisitions fund. With his $5 million endowment, the Rogers Fund has supported the acquisition of many of the museum's greatest treasures. The Hearn Fund, the gift of George A. Hearn established in 1909 to purchase recent art for the museum, was likewise used to acquire John Singer Sargent's Madame X (1883–84) in 1916.

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More times than not, from J. P. Morgan to Jayne Wrightsman, Benjamin Altman to Robert Lehman, the art at the Metropolitan has come through bequests from private collections. Henry (Harry) Osborne and Louisine Havemeyer were two such pioneers, collecting French modernism at a time when institutions like the Met showed little interest in it. Fortunately for the museum, Louisine bequeathed 1,967 objects from her family's farsighted collection in 1929. The collection included

112 works by Degas from the 1860s through the 1890s, as well as significant paintings by Rembrandt, Lucas Cranach, Veronese, and Bronzino. The Met's first painting by Pissarro came from them along with its first Cézanne and second Renoir. Examples of Roman glass and Islamic pottery also entered the collection, as well as Asian works in all media outnumbering any other category in the bequest.

For all of these successes, there were a handful of significant missteps. The case of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney was the most infamous example. In 1929 the museum rejected her collection of 500 works of American modernism along with the funds to house them. In 1931 she founded the Whitney Museum of American Art instead. Through the 1940s the Met continued to come up short with Whitney as the two museums attempted, and failed, to merge. Throughout the time of this planned agreement, the Metropolitan ceded the collecting of American modern art to its supposed partner institution. Similarly, one-time exchange agreements with the Museum of Modern Art and the American Museum of Natural History prevented the Metropolitan from pursuing collections of modernism as well as prehistoric and "primitive" art through its formative years.

Over time, the history of collecting at this encyclopedic museum has been determined by an ever-expanding definition of art worthy of the metropolis. Each revision might add a new volume to the book, new work for the collection, a new wing for the building, and a new department for curation. There was a time when even American painting was overlooked at this most American of museums. Modern art, photography, musical instruments, the decorative arts, Asian art, and the other non-Western arts have all become concerted later additions to the big book. Up through the three-decade tenure of Philippe de Montebello, who retired in 2008, the leaders of the museum have largely balanced this expansion with discernment and a respect for the vast collection and the benefaction put in their trust.

Today that balance is in question. The year 2020 has challenged the American museum as never before. Under cover of the pandemic, activists have used the energy of civil unrest to take aim at the Enlightenment ideal of the encyclopedic institution and the legitimacy of private museums in the public trust. Over the summer, wide-ranging petitions of social grievance were issued against the Detroit Institute of the Arts, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Getty, sfmoma, and the National Gallery of Art, among many other institutions, including the Metropolitan.

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A survey of these episodes provides a background for the Metropolitan's own contemporary travails. In Detroit, activists denounced the 2019 exhibition of a painting by Paul Gauguin for not including sufficient trigger warnings and shieldings for schoolchildren. At the National Gallery, a petition castigated the museum as being the "last plantation on the National Mall" for its

"exploitation and unfair treatment of employees identifying as bipoc, lgbtq, or womxn." At the Getty, an open letter blasted the museum, trust, and research institute for "frequent microaggressions experienced by staff and visitors of color to collecting practices and exhibition programs that glorify the work of white heterosexual cisgender male artists to the exclusion of others." At the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, a petition demanded more exhibition labels addressing the "impact of oppressive systems" as well as the "territorial acknowledgment of Indigenous land occupied by vmfa buildings." At sfmoma, staffers called out the seventy-five museum trustees as "culpable" for the "ongoing violent treatment of bipoc, disabled, queer and trans employees and the continued development of a white supremacist exhibition and collecting program"; they also singled out the former board chairman Charles Schwab, the financier, for creating an "unsafe space for many employees and visitors" due to his support of President Donald Trump.

An inspiration for many of these petitions was an open letter signed in July by over a hundred past and present associates of the Metropolitan called "#fortheculture." This document accused New York's top cultural institutions of "covert and overt white supremacy" and "egregious acts of white violence toward Black/Brown employees." The signatories called for the installation of diversity personnel at all levels of governance and for museums to "support the movement to defund the police."

The specter of widespread staff revolt sent many museums' communications departments into overdrive. "Today we make clear our solidarity with Black Lives Matter and the protestors who are effecting change," responded the National Academy of Design, America's oldest honorary society for artists and architects, pledging to donate to "70+ bail funds, mutual aid funds, and activist organizations across the U.S." "The Frick Collection stands with all the individuals and organizations that seek justice, demand equality for all, and strive to end incidents of police brutality and systemic discrimination," responded the keepers of Henry Clay Frick's picture gallery, in a message that included links to Color of Change and Black Lives Matter "as resources for activism and involvement." To these responses the Metropolitan added its own statement: "Many of you have raised your voices on the streets and on social media, rightly demanding justice," wrote the current museum president and ceo, Daniel H. Weiss, and the director, Max Hollein, in an open letter to staff. "There is much that The Met needs to do, and we are dedicated to doing it. Black Lives Matter"—a response that was deemed insufficient by museum critics.

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After a season of rhetorical gambits, recent actions have only fractured the fault lines of our collecting institutions more spectacularly in full public view. In September, four major museums chose to postpone a retrospective of the paintings of Philip Guston to 2024 due to perceived sensitivities around his imagery of Ku Klux Klansmen. The directors of Washington's

National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, announced the delay "until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston's work can be more clearly interpreted." As the exhibition was presumably torpedoed by such cultural leaders as Darren Walker, the powerful activist president of the Ford Foundation and a new National Gallery trustee, who called the proposed exhibition "tone deaf," the directors demanded "additional perspectives and voices" due to the racial makeup of the exhibition's curators.

Artists and curators rallied against the postponement, potentially reducing the delay. Mark Godfrey, the senior Tate curator and co-organizer of the exhibition, led the charge for reinstatement by responding that it was "extremely patronising to viewers" for museums to be "scared of displaying and recontextualizing the work they had committed to for their programs." As a result of his outspokenness, he was suspended from his position at the museum in a chilling institutional response.

Fifty years ago, Hilton Kramer famously criticized Guston in *The New York Times* for his shift from abstraction to a faux-naif style, calling him "A Mandarin Pretending To Be A Stumblebum." Now for his anti-racist commentaries, Guston is banned by cultural mandarins who seek to undermine the encyclopedic museum by finding any cause to redact the entries available for display.

At the Baltimore Museum of Art, these mandarins have taken aim at their encyclopedic charge by subjecting their permanent collections to nothing less than racialized struggle sessions. Since his appointment in 2016, the bma's white, British-born director, Christopher Bedford, has used critical race theory to guide his stewardship of the collection. For some white leaders, identity politics have turned into an engine and cover for their own advancement and protection at the expense of the public trust. "I'd rather make a mistake going a million miles an hour than do nothing," he said of his appointment. As he set about "re-correcting the canon," two years ago he made a diversity audit of his permanent collection and began pulling out the work of white artists to be exchanged for non-white ones. The practice of selling or "deaccessioning" duplicative works from a permanent collection to fund new acquisitions has long been accepted industry policy. Some of Bedford's new acquisitions at the bma were indeed welcome additions to the collection. Nevertheless, using the race or gender of the artists as your determining criteria—depriving the museum and the people of Baltimore of works by Andy Warhol, Franz Kline, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski—pushed the envelope of this understanding in a way that only accelerated Bedford's speeding ambitions.

For years progressive museum directors have been angling to monetize the vast resources of capital stored in the art in their trust. Fifty years ago, Thomas Hoving's horse-trading of the bequeathed art of Adelaide Milton de Groot so rattled the museum world that it attracted the attention of the New York attorney general and forever tightened deaccessioning standards—up until the current pandemic. This spring, the American Association of Art Museum Directors loosened its deaccessioning standards, temporarily, in the wake of covid-19. The Brooklyn Museum

and the Baltimore Museum both used the emergency measures as a pretext for a firesale of the permanent collection. This time at the bma, the works on offer—by Andy Warhol, Brice Marden, and Clyfford Still—were canonical paintings singularly selected for the cash they would render at auction and public sale. This time the funds would not go to acquisitions but rather, in part, to " daei (diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion) programs to restructure the museum's staffing" and "salary equity across the institution." Bedford suggested that criticism of his sales "is itself an investment in a system of operating institutions that is very deeply centered in white power and white privilege." "We are not seeking any longer the trust of the privileged white few that has enjoyed museums like the bma historically," Bedford concluded. His wish for an erosion of trust came true at a million miles an hour.

Two weeks before the proposed Sotheby's sale, eleven former bma board members submitted a letter to Maryland's secretary of state and its attorney general with concerns about the sales' potential conflicts of interest and other irregularities. Current and former bma board members also publicly objected. The artists Adam Pendleton and Amy Sherald resigned from the board, seemingly in protest of the sale. Two former board chairs rescinded planned gifts totaling $50 million. On the morning of the scheduled auction, fourteen former presidents of the aamd affirmed that long-term museum funding must not come from the sale of art and urged that the liquidation be reconsidered. The auction was reported to be off, then back on. As of press time, the museum announced it "must pause our plans to have further, necessary conversations"—even as it affirmed "our vision and our goals have not changed . . . we will do so through all means at our disposal."

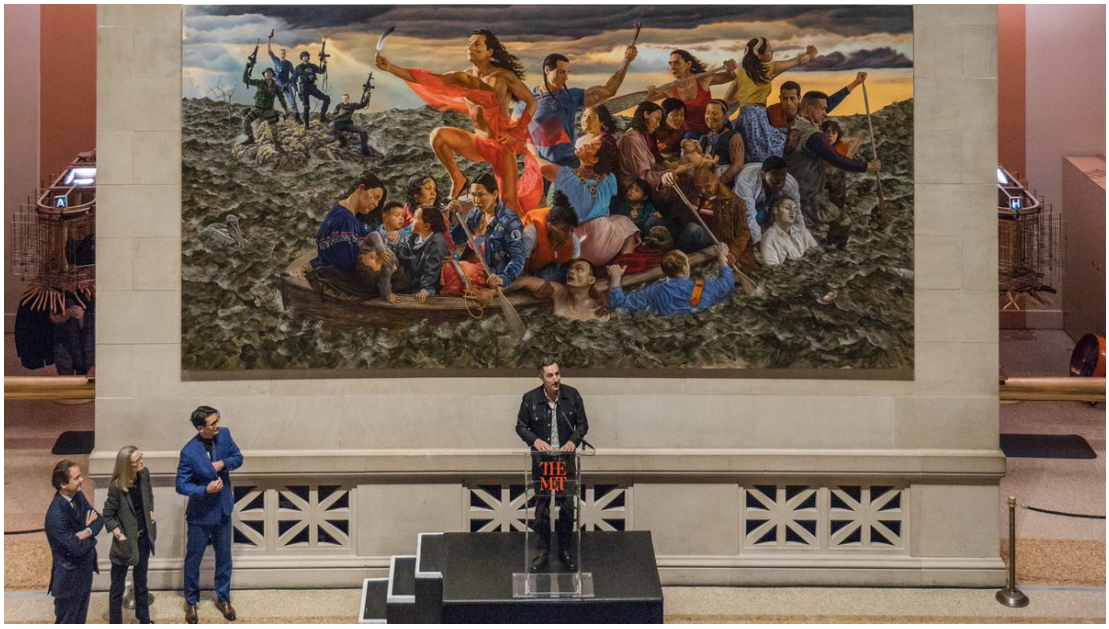
In style if not yet in substance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has embraced this new revisionism. There was a time when the Met served as a counterweight to the more buoyant excesses of its peer institutions. Since his appointment in 2018, the director Max Hollein has instead turned the opprobrium of the encyclopedic museum into his own core theme while staying silent on the national erosion of museum standards. Often he solicits contemporary artists to do his complaining. The son of a postmodern Viennese architect, Hollein's stock-in-trade is the unwanted contemporary intervention inserted into the historical fabric. When he was the young director of the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, for example, he mounted an exhibition called "Shopping" and covered the façade of a department store with a mural by Barbara Kruger that criticized the commerce within.

The new director has spent his inaugural years dragooning contemporary art "to lay bare the inadequacies of the encyclopedic museum."

It hasn't helped that Hollein, according to *The New York Times*, "learned at the knee of Thomas Krens," the discredited franchiser of the Guggenheim museums who mounted exhibitions of Giorgio Armani and Harley-Davidson. At the Met, the new director has spent his inaugural years dragooning contemporary art "to lay bare the inadequacies of the encyclopedic museum and its outdated reliance on taxonomies of schools, regions, and media," as he writes in his own final essay for

"Making The Met." Here he laments the "nationalist overtones and inherent noblesse oblige of the founders' ambitions" and claims the museum is "progressively coming to terms with its own role in perpetuating inequalities." Likewise, seemingly late-stage interventions into the anniversary exhibition are the labels informing us that the "Havemeyer fortune derived from control of the sugar refining industry, which was known for its harsh labor conditions" and (regarding J. P. Morgan) that "a legacy of cultural beneficence cannot overturn widespread social injustice."

The "bold interventions" promised by Hollein has included two 24-by-26-foot banners for the façade commissioned from Yoko Ono that read dream together. He also tapped the Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu to cast four new bronze sculptures to fill Hunt's empty Beaux-Arts niches. Based on African figuration, the works with resplendent crowns and ill-crafted bodies well advertise this director's ambitions to "bring together past and present and solicit community interaction."



Kent Monkman speaks in front of Resurgence of the People*, his recently unveiled mural inside the Met's Great Hall.*

Yet if there is any question that such interventions are ultimately meant to impugn the art within and castigate the institution that contains them, two twenty-six-foot-long murals now just inside Hunt's Great Hall should remove any doubt. Entailing two paintings called *Welcoming the Newcomers* (2019) and *Resurgence of the People* (2019), the diptych recasts Met masterpieces such as Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) and John Singleton Copley's study for *Watson and the Shark* (*ca*. 1778) as ghastly racialized agitprop. In one, indigenous figures can be seen rescuing stranded white settlers, while in the other, white figures are presented as soldiers and policemen displaying racist symbols at a boat of non-white refugees. The artist, Kent Monkman, even inserts himself front and center into both scenes as "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle," his gender-fluid alter ego.

In October, Hollein purchased this supposedly temporary commission for the museum's permanent collection. "There is no doubt that the Met and its development is also connected with a logic of what is defined as white supremacy," he suggested in June. The viewpoint is now reflected at the very top of the museum, as Candace K. Beinecke, the board member who led the search committee that hired Hollein, has just been named Met co-chair. Yet such castigating commissions and false confessions do a disservice to the truly anti-racist history of the institution. The Met was founded out of victory in the Civil War and first helmed by a veteran of that bloody conflict to end slavery. Since then, the museum has dedicated entire wings and hundreds of millions of dollars to present the art of Western and non-Western peoples on equal footing. This history is real, but it presents an inconvenience to contemporary progressive narratives, one that seeks to undermine the encyclopedic collecting institution just when it is needed most.

One final episode well illustrates this danger. In June, Keith Christiansen, the museum's chairman of European paintings, posted to his personal Instagram feed a print featuring Alexandre Lenoir, a figure who tried to save monuments during the French Revolution. "Alexandre Lenoir battling the revolutionary zealots bent on destroying the royal tombs in Saint Denis,'' Christiansen wrote. "How many great works of art have been lost to the desire to rid ourselves of a past of which we don't approve?"

The post came at a moment of national riots that had quickly moved beyond the dismantling of Confederate monuments to the indiscriminate destruction of any and all public works. "And how grateful we are to people like Lenoir," Christiansen continued, "who realized that their value—both artistic and historical—extended beyond a defining moment of social and political upheaval and change."

A member of the Metropolitan staff since 1977, Christiansen well understood that the encyclopedic museum, including his own, is the direct descendant of Lenoir. From the French Revolution, coming out of the American Civil War, on through the Monuments Men of the Second World War, collecting institutions have saved culture from the forces of destruction. "The losses that occur" when major works of art are destroyed by "war, iconoclasm, revolution, and intolerance," as he explained, are the enemies of art history, diminishing our "fuller understanding of a complicated and sometimes ugly past."

Christiansen was denounced for daring to compare Jacobin-like terror to the Jacobin Terror. This fall, he was among the 20 percent of Met staff to announce their retirement, to resign, or to be pushed out. One of his final acts at the museum has been the restoration of the second-floor skylights for its collection of European paintings. It took one hundred and fifty years for that light to make the Met what we see today. It might take far fewer for the museum's future to dim into its unmaking.

1 “Making The Met, 1870–2020” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on August 29, 2020, and remains on view through January 3, 2021.

James Panero is the Executive Editor of *The New Criterion*.

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