

# Reinventing the Wheel: Museum Diversity and Inclusion for All

**T**n 2017, I sat on the executive board of a cultural organization, became the founding president of a museum council, sat on the board of advisors for yet another museum, was a panelist for the California Arts Council, and in my daily life, ran CuratorLove, a small global organization. CuratorLove partners with museums, institutions, galleries, alternative art spaces, art councils, startups, art professionals, art publishers, art organizations, corporations, nonprofits, and a myriad of artists from across the globe to create innovative curatorial projects that are socially driven. All of which roughly translates to constantly meeting artists and arts professionals from all over the globe, while serving to better inform multiple arts-based institutions.

As a Woman of Color (I am Jaxican—Japanese and Mexican), curator, and CEO, I understand the privilege bestowed upon me through my practice and absolutely love what I do. I am happy to bring a voice to my community. As a young art professional and woman of color, diversity and inclusion are concepts that exist at the forefront of my practice; these concepts I battle with almost every single day. Some days I win, some days, not so much. I have learned that language is power, and the latter is at the core of diversity and inclusion. So as you read on, I encourage you to pay particular attention to the terminology I am articulating.

At the largest scale of the conversation, diversity and inclusion appear to be predominantly racial and ethnic in discussion. The statistics are mostly based on the number of People of Color (POC) hired and what agency, if any, they have within traditionally “white” spaces. At museums, however, this is a very current and unique exchange. As more POC seek equity in the workforce, museums appear to react by providing equality and tokenism, which in turn, perpetuates a larger problem.

The current reality in our field is that race- and heritage-based museums chiefly employ people within the muse-

um’s focus (African American museums employ African Americans, Latino museums employ Latinos, and so on). Beyond those institutions, the People of Color ratio is minimal at best. Given that most museums are not race- or heritage-based, this leaves the majority of museums lacking diversity. That’s a harsh reality, I know, and begs the questions: How

*Innovation happens outside of one’s comfort zone; so let’s include others and allow diversity to thrive.*

do we include and who do we include? If the staff lacks POC, should we just hire a Person of Color and call it a day? Well no, that’s not really how that should work. By all means, hire more People of Color, but not just to fill a quota.

The sad reality is that our field lacks a basic understanding of what it means to have diversity and inclusion; simultaneously, we seem to be battling a confusion of the concept of equity versus equality. Why does it even matter? That’s simple. As we seek sustainability through engagement with an ever-changing hybrid, multicultural audience, as museums push to become (and stay) relevant and compete with new sources of information, we no longer have the luxury to speak from the dominant cultural narrative alone. As demographic trends report an ever-growing population of People of Color, museums need to stay current and respond to the changing interests and needs of these communities.

“Ok, so let’s hire a few POC, place them in the right places, and voila: POC

magic!” Well, again, no! This might provide equality, but not equity, not inclusion, and certainly not diversity. So then what *do* we do? We include them everywhere! This might sound scary, but bear with me here.

I’ve sat on a few executive councils and I have yet to encounter anyone younger than me (or with darker hair for that matter) at any of them. This means they are comprised of predominantly Caucasian, financially wealthy individuals, in the later stages of life. This is the makeup of the majority of museum executive boards today. Diversifying these ranks is critical. As these individuals are the volunteer leadership for the organization on behalf of the community, boards are a great place to start to provide equity for members of the community. If the buy-in is too large an investment for stakeholders, then you must get creative.

Diversity also extends well beyond racial or ethnic inclusion. It means allowing people from all financial backgrounds an equal place at the table. It means having different age groups represented and opening the doors of museum leadership to people who will create new types of sustainability for the organization. People with new perspectives will help the institution to grow in transcendental ways. Granted, it also means taking risks, but the potential payout is enormous. Innovation happens outside of one’s comfort zone. So let’s include others and allow diversity to thrive. Maybe this idealized scenario is still a few years away from reality. But what is stopping you from taking baby steps?

A few weeks ago, I was brought in to a museum whose audience is stagnant. My team and I were asked to analyze the reality of the organization and strategize how to bring in new audiences. Sounds simple, yes? Grab some data here, analyze some numbers there, and presto—change happens! I started by asking a few questions to familiarize myself with the organization’s staff and

## The Whole is Greater >

exhibition roster. Looking ahead, while all of its exhibitions had an African American focus, the staff (at first glance) was entirely Caucasian. Although I know better than to assume they were incapable of appropriately presenting these exhibits, it was a concern. Then again, I thought, “Maybe these are incredibly woke individuals!” I asked what kind of audience they sought. Every single one agreed on millennials. More millennial engagement coming right up! I inquired about programming for POC millennials. None existed. Furthermore, it was clear the institution didn’t target millennial People of Color, they just sought millennials (you know, the non-POC kind). Okay, heartbreak.

Statistically speaking, this organization lies within a community comprised of more than 60 percent POC in its immediate surroundings, yet its entire administrative ranks lacked any racial or ethnic diversity (most were not even local to the city). They were thus at risk of missing engagement potential with more than 60

*Ask* what can diversity do for your institution? What does *inclusion* mean to your museum?

percent of their entire immediate potential patron base!

I use this as an example, to encourage you to ask what diversity can do for your institution. What does inclusion mean to your museum? It means having people within the organization who can easily point to flaws in design. It means having extra voices that raise issues predominant narratives have rarely, if ever, been concerned about. It means other intersectionalities can help make you become relevant. It means different languages come through administrative

doors—and I don’t mean just Spanish versus English. It means linguistic agency for the museum by association. It means the institution has the potential to harvest this soft power and use it to surpass its reality, and that of the community it serves. It means diversity and inclusion. It means transcendence at an institutional level.

I’ve discussed the diversity in age, finances, race, ethnicity, intersectionality, and language. What else is diversity? What else can we include? Oh yeah, gender! Now, I don’t mean female to male ratios, I mean getting serious and including the entire LGBTQ range: trans, queer, and every other type of non-binary. Everybody now!

As museums fight to stay relevant, as they aim to rise above existing concerns, as the population shifts, our communication methods speed up, and our attention spans diminish, the only true reality we are left with is this: Museums are falling behind. Museums today are not diverse. They lack inclusivity for all; they barely understand equity. Our primary focus as professionals and within our museums is to steward culture and to provide intriguing ways to disseminate information to our communities. If we fail to acknowledge our shortcomings as organizations, if we don’t allow everyone a say at our table, if we refuse to include the diverse population hybridity that is currently alive and thriving, then we, too, will disappear the way of ancient technologies.

Can we really afford to ostracize this core audience by not speaking its language? By not providing inclusive spaces for all? By not allowing every single intersectionality to be welcomed through our doors? I am not encouraging us to reinvent the wheel here, I just believe everyone needs the chance to play with it! ☉



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