

The African-American Museum Visitor: Who Comes, Who Does Not Come, and Why? The Art Museum Visitor and Non-Visitor

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of this article is African-American attendance and non-attendance at art museums. The findings are based on focus groups and individual interviews I have been conducting to learn African-American feelings about and perceptions of art museums.

Research has shown that persons who frequent art museums are more likely to be of upper education, upper occupation, and upper income; to have been socialized since childhood into cultural activities including art museum attendance; and to be active in a variety of cultural and community affairs as adults.

Therefore, I focused my interviewing on African-Americans who have these same general characteristics. Since higher education is the key characteristic of persons who attend art museums frequently, two-thirds of these respondents were college graduates and over half had postgraduate or professional degree work. Only a few had not been to college at all. They were well traveled in the United States and abroad, active in community events and volunteer work, and sophisticated consumers of cultural offerings.

In addition, though the respondents who did visit art museums regularly were more likely to have had some art training in early life, even they did not find their visits to be entirely satisfying because of the elements that I will discuss. I will concentrate my remarks on why most of these African-Americans are not frequent art museum visitors.

In my consulting with museums, the most frequent question I am asked is, "Why don't African-Americans attend in greater numbers," at least in proportion to their percentage of the population? Every museum has assured me that "our doors are open and we want everyone to come." Yet in subtle ways they don't recognize they are often conveying the message, "don't come in, you're not welcome."

As much as possible, I will present the respondents' statements in their own words, to transmit the power of their

feelings and not dilute their comments through paraphrasing.

From the hours of taped conversations that I analyzed, comments about the dimensions and perceptions of art museums fell into two categories: the internal and the external aspects. I'll discuss the internal aspects first. Four items of this nature recurred in these conversations.

INTERNAL DIMENSIONS

1. Art museum exhibits generally are not inclusive of minority cultures or are not culturally relevant to minority citizens. Therefore, these visitors feel unacknowledged, overlooked—even nonpersons—in the museum.

One respondent summed up the situation as: Programming and exhibits that are not inclusive of minority cultures make these citizens feel left out.

Another said, "Blacks come in looking for what looks like them and when they don't see it, that tells them 'you aren't important enough to acknowledge.'"

"It would be helpful," a third person gently suggested, "if the art museum showed more black artists or exhibits that dealt with African art." He added that he didn't feel this was a deliberate discrimination against his heritage, but that there is a subtle ignoring of other than European traditions.

As a fourth individual pointed out, "A person has a tendency to do things you have some connection with," and when the museum rarely displays black art, it appears to indicate that some minorities are excluded from the American dream and mainstream. As a result, African-Americans view the museum as "not a place for me."

"When you go somewhere," another person added, "you go to see something that reflects you or you have some connection with, and for the most part, art museums have very limited African artifacts or African-American paintings or sculpture. People in the museum want us to experience what they want to show us but they don't want to experience life through us, because when we show them what our experience has been, it's been a very negative experience in relation to Caucasians, and they don't want to hear that, they don't want to see that, they don't want to feel that. Then they say, 'You're living in the past.'"

"If they don't want to recognize black artists, we're not going there," another averred. "We have been conditioned to honor everything that's white. But, when you say 'black,' then they draw back. We won't spend our money where we aren't recognized and appreciated. That day is over."

2. Exhibits on minority artists are usually one-shot deals, which usually take place only in Black History Month. This

often reinforces the perception that continuous emphasis on minority cultures is irrelevant. Also, they are poorly marketed to white audiences who could learn about the minority culture from the exhibits.

One focus group participant strongly urged, "African-Americans don't want to feel like 'here's a one-shot deal.' If the true desire is to get me coming to your museum, you don't want to have just a special program in February. You want to give something throughout the year that brings me back continually. You don't want a special program that's for 28 days, in the shortest month of the year, and then it doesn't happen again for another year."

Again, "when it's Black History Month, you get an explosion of African-American content. But on the average day, you don't get that thrust that you can relate to personally."

Another individual commented sadly, that after an art museum at which she is a board member had concluded the run of a major black-oriented exhibit which included speakers, workshops, gift shop items, and catalog, there was no continuing program to follow up on this exhibit, not even during Black History Month. Instead of the staff coming to the minority outreach committee of the board to talk about creative ways to accomplish something for Black History Month, they just said after the fact that there was no money to do anything. They didn't even request suggestions that would not cost a lot or ask the committee to raise money to provide some program, she stated.

She also felt that marketing to the white community was minimal for the black exhibit, which was distressing because it "could have been used as a teaching tool to enhance white participants' respect and knowledge."

A black focus, such as Black History Month, or an exhibit or program on black artists, is important to get African-Americans' initial participation, but it's not enough to win their long-term allegiance, noted one respondent. They need to feel there is more than just one topical exhibit specifically planned to capture their attention.

It was noted that one major art museum, which carried out an extensive outreach effort when the museum had an exhibition by black artists, was rewarded with very high attendance by the African-American community which did not return for the next major exhibition on an entirely different subject. The staff was baffled, because, having made a significant effort once, they thought the African-American guests would be forever committed to attendance. Instead, the guests' suspicion that they were welcome only for that specific exhibit was confirmed when the museum made no subsequent effort to involve them. Apparently, not even a guest book to gather names and addresses was offered, so the museum could extend invitations to future events.

A staff member at another museum acknowledged that though attention usually wanes after the close of an exhibit aimed at minorities, the crucial issues that need action are not of short duration.

3. Minority cultures have little input into decision making from the onset of planning; decisions are made "for them," not "with them," even when African-Americans serve on boards, committees, and staffs. And, one African-American on a board, committee, or staff cannot adequately represent the views and values of a varied minority population.

"There's not always a commitment to the idea of inclusion," a board member found. She felt that "they plan for us, not with us," and requested, "Don't bring us in after you've made the plans." She was distressed that when the minority outreach committee submitted recommendations for new committee members to the director, that person had the power to add more names and to decide whom to invite to join the committee. "When someone else is choosing for you, that's not acceptable," this board member stated.

"Museums must include minorities in a substantive way," and "most museums haven't examined whether they are doing a good job or a poor job as far as minorities are concerned," commented a black minister who is involved in the arts. "The single most important factor is, if the director doesn't buy into it, it's not going anywhere. She must sell the board on the vision and the necessity of doing it."

An arts administrator said, "Black people on museum staffs have heartache because they still have to fight their way to get their exhibits in or get people to understand, to have dialog. It's hurtful to be employed somewhere where you still are the token and still have to convince the majority population, or the superiority culture, that it's important to have exhibits by blacks or native Americans."

Another person commented on the lack of a career ladder for minority staff, who need training, mentoring, and professional development. Is there a career ladder for the staff member who continually pushes against the power structure for inclusion of minority cultures? Is she accused of compromising quality?

Disapproval was voiced for asking only the most prominent, visible black citizens to serve on boards: "I take offense to somebody asking a politician or doctor to serve on a board to represent my views. If you want to know what the average person wants in this museum, you do one of two things: you do a survey of the black community or you get average Joe Blow articulated into the mix. One black person on the board doesn't mean anything."

Another agreed: "What really worries me is that every time any of these institutions selects one of us to sit on its board, those people have gotten so far away from the mainstream, they no longer identify with the masses. And that scares me to death."

A person who worked at a major national corporation said that if a museum asked her corporation to send a minority person to serve on its board and she was asked to do it, she would have to say to herself: "I'm not representing myself; I'm representing the corporation." So, I'd have to line up with whatever the corporation is, which is a very Republican, ultra-conservative company. You can't be your own person serving on that board."

4. African-Americans will not increase their attendance at art museums until they feel part of the institutional setting, which requires a long-term commitment by the museum to include them in all aspects. Minority outreach committees are often short-term task forces, with no real ability to effect change. What is required is sharing power at every level on an ongoing basis.

African-American citizens need to feel part of the institutional setting, said a minister. When the black community in one city boycotted an exhibit of African art that it felt sent the wrong image of black people by depicting myths and stereotypes, the minister told the museum that if African-Americans didn't have input into the choice of the exhibits and their presentation, they would not support the offerings. He said this particular exhibit "appeared to be just another instance of museums being insensitive to minority interests that has been true over a long time," and that it reinforced African-American opinion of the museum "as an elitist institution."

To improve its relationships with minority communities, the minister said, the institution must change, to include minorities in all aspects of museum life and make a commitment to the long term. When this change is obvious, by demonstrating long-term commitment, minorities will respond, he predicted.

"Who will make the decisions on the use of resources?" asked one professional. The views of minorities should be infused into all areas of the museum: governance, staff, interpretive programs, acquisitions, she said. It is important that minorities serve on not just the outreach committee but on the policy committees, such as finance, acquisitions, and nominating.

If museums are searching for a long-term solution, it can't be handled by a task force, because those deal with short-term projects and solutions, stated another respondent. According to a museum assistant director, a task force can develop a plan for analyzing programs, community expectations, perception, lack of inclusivity, and why African-Americans feel marginalized, but it usually has no power to enforce any of its recommendations. Then, task force members lose interest when no action is taken by the museum board and staff, and the black community becomes further disillusioned.

"When they say they want more black participation, is it

lip service or is it serious?" asked an administrator. "If they're serious about having an ongoing relationship with the black community, that's reflected in staffing and making those people a regular part of the decision making process." And, "institutions often give lip service by saying they want the organization to be inclusive of all groups, but when they make decisions, they're restrictive on who's involved," he added. "Being really serious means sharing of power," he emphasized.

EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

1. African-Americans' negative impressions of art museums stem partly from past experiences as well as from recent occurrences and from their perception of the art museum as an elitist organization.

Especially for older persons who attended segregated schools, art history, art appreciation, and studio art courses were not part of their education. Unless they schooled themselves later, they have no preparation for visiting an art museum, though they may be accomplished participants in business, the professions, and community and civic affairs. Also, since art appreciation and art history courses concentrate on Eurocentric art, these respondents felt that museums don't consider African works to be art.

When I asked them, "If I should say to you, 'let's go to the art museum,' what kind of place do you perceive it to be?" the answers ranged from "sterile" and "a place with no relationship to the lives of people," to "exciting; each visit is a grand new experience."

Some persons cited examples of their having been made to feel unwelcome. One woman said, "My mother took us to the art museum twice when I was young, and both times she took the five of us, she got a laundry list of questions as to why we were there, so we stopped going. I didn't get an appreciation for museums 'til I went to Europe. There, once you pay your admission fee, nobody cares, unless you touch something."

Another recounted how, as a museum volunteer, she repeatedly observed black children from a nearby housing project being turned away harshly by museum staff. When her own children came to see her there and they were turned away abruptly, they protested and then the staff was very apologetic when they found out these were *her* children.

Even after public places were desegregated, one person reported, "Every time I would walk into a white museum, there was this elitist air. It was a cold, sterile place. Anytime people talked to me, they were talking down, almost using sign language, in order to get their point over."

Several individuals said that they had felt under surveillance when they had visited art museums. One stated: "I

don't want to see this little security guard with his little keys and his little flashlight coming after me and wondering if I'm going to pick up that painting and walk out the door."

Others said that when they went to museums and other cultural centers, they were stared at, which made them feel they were not welcome. "The art museum is perceived by the black community to be an elite institution that doesn't make any effort to attract blacks, to make them want to be there," one respondent stated. A museum administrator agreed that art museums have too often implied that "this is the way we do it, and if you don't do it our way, you'll feel uncomfortable here."

2. Art museums deliberately fail to promote their offerings to minority communities, which means that African-Americans continue to feel like outsiders.

A thoughtful gentleman summed up his feelings about the lack of promotion of the art museum to the black community thus: "The black community is not a priority audience for any cultural institution. They are not seeking to bring the black audience in, because it is not seen as an important audience. Getting blacks to attend is no big deal for any of them."

If art museums are truly trying to expand their African-American audience, he asked, where are they publicizing their events and how? Do stories appear in the black press, are PSAs heard on black radio stations, are black staff members interviewed by local television stations? Are invitations extended through churches, fraternal organizations, social clubs, community centers, business and trade associations for all types of programs at the museum?

Another gentleman commented: "I find this strange: promoters promote an event to a distinct group. They advertise only on the other side of town (where most white people live) and there's no heavy promotion on this side of town (where black people live). That's letting you know that they want participation from that side of town, so we conclude that we're not welcome, and we won't go as second-class citizens. The feeling still prevails that we are still the outsiders looking in."

A docent bewailed the fact that he was one of only three African-Americans of the 200 docents at his art museum. A board member at another museum had heard white docents there say they wouldn't make an effort to learn about African-American artists like Jacob Lawrence, as they would for Picasso. The few black docents in that setting have become disenchanted and feel isolated, she reported. Trying to recruit minority volunteers was difficult when the institution was perceived as caring little about the minority culture.

3. Art museums' efforts to get more African-American visitors is based primarily on the museum's need to meet government and foundation requirements that they broaden

their audiences in order to receive funding, rather than on a genuine commitment to serve minority audiences.

Since museums have made few efforts in the past to diversify their audiences, suspicions about the motivations behind the current effort are widespread. One respondent said, "I think they let just enough black folks in to justify the public monies they get."

Another asked about the nature of my research. She wondered if I were asking questions about why African-Americans don't attend "because art museums have to have a certain number of blacks attending to get certain funding. I resent that and get angry about it," she said.

Several persons stated that "it's government money that funds most of these places." Most felt their tax dollars were supporting institutions that don't serve them and don't sincerely care about them.

One respondent said: "Too often, museums are only interested in minority participation because as long as they can justify government funds, they'll be able to keep their elitism going. Otherwise, if they serve only one segment of the public, they might not be qualified to receive public monies. I really feel they have enjoyed having a place where we have excluded ourselves."

When I said that I was gathering these data to help museums understand better what they need to do to serve minority communities, her response was, "I cannot believe they don't know what they've done wrong." Another person commented, from her work experience, that those who are running the shows don't know, don't understand, and that African-Americans "get hung up on 'they purposely did this to us,'" while, she said, "90% of the time they didn't even calculate us into the mix. Then they say, 'Now, I need you in the mix—a woman or someone of your race.'"

She continued: "Things are changing so much, pretty soon the numbers of minorities and women will engulf the dominant male Caucasians who run things. That means there will be more blacks, Hispanics, and females with money, and what the museums are not saying now is that "When there's a black, Hispanic, female, or Asian population with money that wants to be entertained, I want some of that money, so I'm going to start in the 90s trying to figure out what I can do, so by the year 2000, I can get that money." That's what they're doing but they're just not saying it."

One person felt that museums plan to keep minorities out by imposing high rental fees and discretionary rules and regulations that don't apply to white organizations that want to rent the museum facilities. This has the effect of the museums' maintaining themselves for the benefit of major corporations and their executives, thus perpetuating a dual society, she said.

4. The bottom line is based on two concepts: respect for a

minority culture, and assurance that persons of a minority culture will feel comfortable in and welcomed by the museum. These concepts require more than an absence of limitations or restraints; they demand a continuous, determined effort to turn things around and acknowledge African-Americans as full participants "in the mix."

What do art museums need to do? I asked the focus group respondents.

Their responses included: The staffs, docents, and trustees need training in other than the Eurocentric perspective; they need also to learn that though an exhibit is different, it's worthy of respect and attention, one respondent said. Museum staffs should show respect for other cultures; what they do show is not equal to the respect paid to their own culture, she stated, and "that's not acceptable any more." They must be sensitive to the viewpoints of minority citizens, rather than be insulting in their remarks about them or to them. Docents frequently perpetuate stereotypes about minority citizens, she found. In contrast, she had heard white docents in Detroit, Chicago, and Atlanta who exhibited a real knowledge and understanding of black artists and art.

Another individual said, "We have been ostracized and made to feel like outcasts, but then we are part of the responsibility, because when we get the opportunity to get our foot in the door, we've got our nose so high in the air! We own some of that."

A museum administrator thought it was important to be sensitive to different customs and values. There are different ways of looking at a sense of time, use of first names, dress and its status message, meeting styles, communication styles, and learning styles, he said.

It was recommended that museums show and acquire black art, especially contemporary African-American art. Museums can rectify past omissions by acknowledging that things have not been satisfactory from the African-American perspective, and they can ask for assistance in understanding how they can do a more effective job in the future.

One person advised, "We tend to patronize those things that welcome us openly and establish dialog. That's what museums should try to do—establish dialog. You get into it gradually."

At the conclusion of one focus group session, an individual stated, "I don't want people to think that the only time we'll come to the art museum is when it's African or African-American art. The more important thing is, when you get there, what is the atmosphere? Is the ambiance warm and friendly? Another added, "If you choose to go somewhere, you choose to go where you know, without a doubt, that you're going to be accepted."

Acceptance, warmth, friendliness, respect, recognition of others' values and preferences, willingness to keep learning about others' customs and styles—all add up to "hospital-

ity," a gracious welcoming of all our guests. Add to that a museum's determination to share the power in making decisions and many of the difficulties in reaching minority communities will be overcome.

FINALE

As you recognize from some of these statements, developing the African-American audience for art museums is an issue of such significance and magnitude that it demands our concerted, immediate attention.

As you also recognize, some of these respondents have erroneous ideas of how art museums operate—such as their being primarily supported by government funds. These participants also have little acquaintance with the purpose of target marketing.

However, whatever their perception is, that is their reality. Just as evaluators in science museums must confront "naive notions" about science before they can educate people about what is actual and true, so must art museum staff confront the misperceptions that exist in the minds of their potential audiences. If you want to win these people as visitors, you must first deal with what they believe is true about art museums, then demonstrate what the truth is, and finally invite their participation in improving things.

You can also discern in these comments, pain and disappointment voiced by these articulate, well-educated, and sophisticated African-Americans. Though some of the pain occurred years ago, we must acknowledge that it affects their responses to us today. Because art museums haven't done an adequate job over the decades of welcoming minority audiences, the residue of those earlier experiences still resonates through minority communities.

Museums may respond to this "call to action" by claiming they don't have the staff, the funds, or other resources to undertake an outreach effort to underserved constituencies. That decision must be made on the basis of what is the right thing to do.

Interestingly, what is the right thing to do is also the most beneficial for both the museum and its minority citizens. These people have lived for decades, even generations, without full or partial participation in art museums. They have enjoyed rich, satisfying, worthwhile lives without it. They can continue to do the same because they don't need us to accomplish that. We, on the other hand, need them; we can't survive without them. If for no other reason that our own future well-being, we must provide a museum that meets their expectations as well as ours.

"Restructuring" is a popular buzz word these days. Essentially, it means major change—not just fine-tuning, but turning things around, adopting new perspectives and directions. It means persuading the staff and trustees that the museum's quality of life and self-preservation depend on

doing things differently. Only then will diverse audiences find meaning, satisfaction, and rewards in the art museum. If, as one focus group participant predicted, people of color will engulf the dominant white establishment within a few years, will we be in their favor? When crises arise, will they be on our side or will they return the benign neglect they accuse us of offering them over the years?

In my numerous audience studies, I have found that visitors and potential visitors are asking two questions of any museum: (1) What does going to the museum mean to me? Is it relevant to my life? If not, how can I find the connection? (2) Does the museum care about me? Will it make me feel comfortable, help me understand, make the effort to bridge the gap, rather than expect me to deal with it on its terms? There are concerns of all audiences, not just minority communities. Caring is the basic ingredient, for all museum visitors, whatever their race or station in life.

I will close with two quotations by eminent artists:

George Bernard Shaw said: "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them; that's the essence of inhumanity."

And Francis Picabia said: "Our head is round so that our thinking can change directions."

Let us heed these admonitions as we change direction to become more humane, inclusive institutions that welcome all our fellow citizens.

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