

# Museums Change Their Approach to Showing White Male Artists

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, business-as-usual gets a rethink.



By Robin Pogrebin

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This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

Winslow Homer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Jasper Johns and Edward Hopper at the Whitney. Matisse at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

At a time when cultural institutions all over the United States are making a concerted effort to integrate more women and people of color into their collections, staffs, boards and exhibitions, shows of established white male artists continue to be featured prominently on museum calendars.

In part, the continued presentation of these traditional artists speaks to their enduring importance in the canon of art history. But it is also raising important questions for museums about how to make room for alternative voices and how to revisit the contributions of historical figures through a contemporary lens.

“It is about complicating the narrative,” Max Hollein, the Met’s director, said in a phone interview. “In this environment, looking at art history anew means we can reassess their oeuvre — diversify not only those who scrutinize it but also make sure the work is presented in a more complex way.”

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, efforts at diversity, equity and inclusion are now top of mind for most every institution and have led to the calling out of entrenched racism by the staffs of some, including the Met, the Guggenheim and the Smithsonian.

Museums are now on notice of the need to diversify their boards and hire a greater range of curators and staff members, to ensure that multiple points of view are reflected in an institution’s decision-making.

Many museums are engaging outside diversity consultants or hiring in-house diversity officers to monitor their progress.

The current “Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents” show — which the Met organized with the National Gallery in London — focuses on conflict in the artist’s work, from images of the Civil War and Reconstruction to hunting scenes. The exhibition’s centerpiece is one of Homer’s most famous paintings, “The Gulf Stream,” which portrays a Black man on a rudderless fishing boat in stormy seas.

“As Homer’s only major Caribbean seascape painted in oil and the only one to depict a Black figure, it also references complex social and political issues,” the painting’s wall text explains, “including the legacy of slavery and imperialism in the wake of the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War.”

“The Gulf Stream,” displayed as part of “Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents” at the Met through July 31. Timothy A. Clary/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Denise Murrell, who recently joined the Met as associate curator for 19th- and 20th-century art, said it was also important to look at the mix of shows at a museum at any given time — are various viewpoints represented? Currently at the Met, for example, are the exhibitions “Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room” and “Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast.” The “Fictions” show features the marble bust “Why Born Enslaved!” by the French sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, which examines Western sculpture in relation to the histories of trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and empire.

Members of the media at a preview in March of “Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast” at the Met. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

For the Met’s 150th anniversary show, each gallery had one or more wall labels presenting, chronologically, how the collection was built. In the label titled “The Met and Black Artists in the Early Twentieth Century,” the museum acknowledged its shortcomings.

“Among the important modern-art movements the Met neglected in the early twentieth century was the Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of creative talent and energy in literature, music, and visual arts throughout the 1920s and 1930s,” the label said. The lack of engagement with key artists, such as Aaron Douglas, Charles Alston, and Laura Wheeler Waring, the label continued, “is especially surprising and regrettable given its close physical proximity to the neighborhood of Harlem, the foundational nexus of this international movement.”

Ms. Murrell is now working on a Met show about that period. “Clearly something is underway,” she said by phone. “We are actively thinking through how to present these collections. There is movement.”

“Large Reclining Nude” by Henri Matisse, from 1935, will be featured in the Philadelphia show. Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and The Baltimore Museum of Art

In October, the Philadelphia Museum of Art — with the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris and the Musée Matisse in Nice, France — plans to present “Matisse in the 1930s,” which focuses on that decade of the painter’s life.

The show will in part explore how the artist dealt with his nude female models, one of whom also served as his assistant. “What we’re trying to do is explain the question of the male artist and the clothed or unclothed female model,” Matthew Affron, the Philadelphia Museum’s curator of modern art and one of the Matisse show’s curators, said by phone. “It raises questions about what he was doing and how we should think about what we did.

“Questions of gender are central,” Mr. Affron added. “It’s not a neutral situation.”

Mel Bochner's work "Measurement: 1" to 12" (Color)" is on display through Aug. 22 at the Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph by Nicholas Knight/via Peter Freeman, Inc., New York

The Art Institute of Chicago on April 23 opened a retrospective on the drawings of the American conceptual artist Mel Bochner. But the museum's director, James Rondeau, points out that the museum at the same time is presenting exhibitions of four contemporary artists who may be lesser known — Igshaan Adams, Basma al-Sharif, Hiroshi Senju and Judy Fiskin.

"This variety and balance is core to our mission," Mr. Rondeau said by email. "We are able to leverage more established names while introducing new work and providing a more expansive view about contemporary art."

Even as curators are approaching shows differently, so too are audiences bringing — and demanding — a more nuanced perspective to what they see in museums, art experts say. "That heightens the impact and the awareness from both sides," Mr. Hollein of the Met said.

Some traditionalists have been concerned that museums are in the midst of an over correction, showing a preponderance of artists of color while neglecting some of the old guard. In 2020, Gary Garrels, the longtime chief curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, caused an uproar after he was reported to have said in a Zoom meeting, “Don’t worry, we will definitely still continue to collect white artists.” Despite responding that his comments were “a little bit skewed,” he resigned. But several curators say it does not have to be a zero sum game.

“All museums want to expand what has been the canon to have a more balanced program,” Mr. Affron said. “It’s not either or, it’s yes and. We want to have a wider variety of voices and images. When we do exhibitions about historical figures like Matisse, of course we do them in a scholarly way with a sense of historical perspective. But we also must apply points of view that are informed by the questions of today.”

That “yes and” approach should inform every museum’s exhibition program, some curators say, making sure to consider the artist’s cultural context, personal history and potentially controversial imagery. “Providing a context that does not obscure the work and its efforts seems a strategy that we should all employ,” Valerie Cassel Oliver, the curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, said by email. “Work by Hopper should address the realities of communities who could not lodge at the hotels he featured either in trade magazines he created for or in the paintings he created.

“As for Johns, why not introduce Sari Dienes,” she added, referring to the Hungarian-born American artist who inspired both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. “These strategies help organically shape the conversation that feels less like pandering and artifice and offers a real and impactful dimension to the practice of those artists.”

If the balance has shifted for now, others say, so be it: The white European male art tradition has long enjoyed pre-eminence. “For centuries, western cultural institutions have had a very narrow vision of what constitutes artistic excellence — namely, art made by white men,” Anne Pasternak, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, said by email. “The fact is, the ideas that shaped our collections and exhibitions are deeply intertwined with histories of oppression, which limited opportunities for greater enrichment for artists and audiences alike.

“It matters what stories we tell and who tells them,” Ms. Pasternak continued. “At the Brooklyn Museum, we are striving to be more intentional and inclusive of artistic excellence in all of New York City’s major populations. The playing field is becoming fairer.”

Museums have also become much more conscious about what they acquire — filling in gaps in their collections with the work of artists they have failed to recognize over the years.

In 2019, for example, the Baltimore Museum of Art pledged to acquire only work by female artists for a year.

The Souls Grown Deep Foundation says it has helped more than a dozen museums acquire paintings, sculptures and works on paper by self-taught African American artists of the South.

Last December, the Met, together with the Studio Museum in Harlem, announced that it would acquire and conserve thousands of photographs by James Van Der Zee, the portraitist who chronicled the Harlem Renaissance. These developments leave some museum leaders cautiously encouraged.

“We’ll just have to see how things evolve over time,” Ms. Murrell said, “and whether museums live up to their commitment to be anti-racist in everything they do.”