

## Why are white curators still running African art collections?

*The Brooklyn Museum has announced two new curators. Both are white and one was hired specifically to oversee African art. Of course we're mad*

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*Exterior of the Brooklyn Museum: located near Crown Heights, Flatbush and Park Slope, all areas associated with different ethnic communities. Photograph: Jon Grizzle*

Earlier last week the Brooklyn Museum put out a press release announcing two new curators who will begin in April. Both curators are white and one was specifically hired to oversee the museum's African art collection. The appointment of a white person to curate African art in Brooklyn naturally incited a critical response from people of color. This is an open letter addressed to the Brooklyn Museum regarding this controversy:

It is not just that people who do not represent my identity and heritage are continually chosen to curate it, it's that I know there are curators who are part of the African Diaspora who are qualified and available. During a time like this politically and culturally it is tone deaf to appoint two new curators whose identity, experience, and gaze are already overrepresented in the art world.

White curators are continually given a platform and power to determine how we engage with the continent of Africa and its artifacts in museums. Black Panther withstanding, there have been many critical conversations happening in the art world regarding inclusion and representation. Especially in New York City, but particularly in Brooklyn where gentrification is an immediate issue.

The social and cultural landscape of Brooklyn is changing. Old warehouses and factories are being adaptively redesigned in to galleries and restaurants. Conversations about the displacement of the diversity and unique cultural identities that make Brooklyn so significant in the legacy of hip-hop music, immigrant communities/enclaves, and food in New York City – are happening now. Any cultural and/or art space that is situated in Brooklyn has a responsibility to – at least – feign an awareness of this reality.

The Brooklyn Museum is located near Crown Heights, Flatbush and Park Slope. These are areas, if you know Brooklyn or are from New York, that are associated with different ethnic communities. As a Jamaican-American who has family in Brooklyn, I knew growing up the Caribbean folks were in Flatbush and Crown Heights. You cannot ignore these realities, especially since art and city transformation have such an intersectional relationship.

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The infamous Killmonger museum scene in Black Panther was not lost on those who us who like to think we are apart of the art world. Killmonger's frustration in that scene resonates with many of us from the African diaspora. We have constantly expressed this frustration. Thus, the appointment of these two curators provides another concrete example of the problematics in which this discontentment is rooted. To be in a museum where my legacy and heritage are not represented or are misrepresented. To not be included as an expert or regarded as qualified to curate art that represents aspects of who we are is debasing. We know, especially now, that to say you could not find qualified black/African curators is inaccurate to say the least and lazy at best.

I feel insulted. Unlike Killmonger in a fictional story of a non-colonized African country, we cannot just steal our stuff back and return home to a future that the rest of the world has yet to catch up with. That most of the artifacts from the continent of Africa and the Americas are in museums in Europe and the United States is inherently violent and neocolonial. It ultimately shows that you don't think we can be responsible owners of our legacy. Thus, hiring even one more white person to have control over the rearticulation and reassessment of the African art in your museum is just

compounding aggravation, which comes from a deep frustration of being devalued.

The art world continues to claim an increase in diversity and inclusion, though in circumstances like this one we are reminded of how cultural norms and habits, no matter how antiquated, prevail. It is clear that you simply do not care because there is no way you can say you did not know. To the two new curators, I hope you are deeply assessing your positionality. You have undoubtedly agreed to perpetuate colonial behavior in Brooklyn as residents of color simultaneously undergo a different, but not wholly dissimilar, form of displacement and degradation in the form of gentrification. While we are already made invisible in museums and art spaces, gentrification is another process that further invisibilizes us and our experiences.

I'm not surprised that a museum in the United States, which has thrived despite the immense lack of impactful diversity and representative curation, would continue hiring practices that expose a disinterest in restructuring white-centric perspectives in African art and photography. But, I'm still mad and I'm still going to hold you accountable.

We're in a cultural moment where we encourage, and if necessary, demand transparency from places that have gotten away with neglecting the myriad realities of historical and contemporary art. This digital outcry to your new hires is not regarding their qualifications, but rather pointing to the structural legacy within museums and the art world that has allowed, primarily, white curators to be gatekeepers and specialists in repeatedly framing our historical and contemporary creative expressions.

Despite our aptitude and desire to centralize our perspective, most established spaces that collect and exhibit art and artifacts from the continent of Africa are not willing and/or ready to give us the space and ownership of our history. As a writer and urban geographer from the African diaspora who focuses on blackness in art and city life, I am constantly asked to justify my perspective. And yet, a white person with a similar focus is automatically seen as legitimate and will be given a job to preside over a space that directly impacts the African diaspora.

I'm not surprised, but still mad.

And of course we're mad. Our "outrage" is warranted, but that is not the point. The point is that we are still not supported by institutions to curate our own experience. We brave coloniality everyday by calling out institutions, like yourself, that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate it. Do better!

- *Teju Adisa-Farrar is an urban geographer, writer and poet.*