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We the People

Bringing Diversity to American Museums



Mickalene Thomas, *A Little Taste Outside of Love* (2007) © Mickalene Thomas. Brooklyn Museum. Image courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

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Published 10 July 2018 in [Other Insights](#)

Generally, a walk through the permanent collection galleries of this nation's museums is an alienating experience. You, living a life of difference, shaped by color, sexuality, gender or creed, are rarely seen; but you search the walls for a slice of your American story anyway. The images and the history they present are familiar in the ways in which they exclude you. On rare occasions you find yourself, but your American narrative is reduced to one of pain (the slave); the supporting role (the help); the martyr (the freedom marcher); the dead.



Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington* (1796). Photo credit: Brooklyn Museum

But you are alive and there are other images that tell different stories; you know because you have seen them. There's that one where you sit at the kitchen table in solitude or that one where you are the star, gallantly riding a horse, beautiful and free. But where are those images of power and significance? America is the story of many, so you wonder why it is that history here seems to privilege just one people? You feel small; they are larger than life.

We are in the American galleries at the Brooklyn Museum looking at twin images of a nation, once divided. On one wall hangs Gilbert Stuart's grand portrait of America's first president, *George Washington* (1796). He is positioned, as he often is, in the classical pose of an orator or general, gazing resolutely ahead. The added symbolism of the rainbow in the window behind him suggests he is considering what bright future might lie ahead for a young nation high on victory and so full of possibility.

What might startle visitors to the museum is that there is an answer directly in front of him. Following Washington's line of sight is Mickalene Thomas's *A Little Taste Outside of Love* (2007), in which a nude African American woman gazes over her bared shoulder back at him. Thomas's rhinestone Venus lounges like the odalisque of European tradition. Like Washington, she too has battled for the sovereignty to manifest her own destiny.

The juxtaposition of the works feels like a monumental affirmation of what happened next; over the course of a couple of hundred years, you became visible. There is something meta-textual about this arrangement of glances in a museum; stories of America that are folded into other stories which illuminate the nation as a complex set of narratives about victory, setbacks and, yes, progress.

This isn't going to be your typical story of American art

"Looking at those paintings you know right away this isn't going to be your typical museum story of American art," says the museum's Director Anne Pasternak. On a \$60,000 budget, the museum rehung its permanent collection of American art in a way that is celebratory, yet arresting in its honesty. You have to grapple with the symbolism of Frederic Sackrider Remington's *The Outlier*, a 1909 impressionist-inspired oil of a lone Native American figure riding into darkness; the alluring beauty of the white female figure typified in John Singer Sargent's *Violet Fishing* (1889), asking yourself how and why she became the definition of beauty itself; and Thomas Cole, Henry Ossawa Tanner and Georgia O'Keeffe's magnificent landscapes, which conjure at once pastoral prosperity and strange fruit.

The Brooklyn Museum's reinstallation of its permanent collection is part of a move on the part of many institutions—the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los

Angeles County Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art—to recast the grand, dominant narrative of America. These museums have each taken new approaches to creating layered permanent collection exhibitions that seek to not only correct the record but to propose nuanced representations of those who had, until now, largely been left out.



Hank Willis Thomas in front of his work *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around* (2015–16) © 2016 Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, New York. Photo credit: J Caldwell, Nasher Museum

The Nasher Museum of Art, young enough to be unburdened by the long and exclusionary histories of other American museums, is radically rethinking its growing collection. The 12-year-old museum has rooted its collection in inclusion; its upcoming showing of works acquired since 2005, “People Get Ready: Building a Contemporary Collection”, will present art not just by underrepresented women and people of color but also Southerners, Native Americans and self-taught artists.

We are actively inverting the ratio

“We are actively inverting the ratio that one frequently encounters in a museum collection, anchored by a past collection which is dominated by straight white men,” says the museum’s deputy director, Trevor Schoonmaker. Works such as Hank Willis Thomas’s *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around* (2015-6), includes an image of a black protester holding up the American flag, force museum goes to experience history, identity and art first from the margins and then the center.



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Gallery)* (2016), Carnegie Museum of Art © Kerry James Marshall

How permanent is the collection? That is the question that Eric Crosby, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Carnegie Museum of Art, has been pondering as he prepares to open “Crossroads: Carnegie Museum of Art’s Collection 1945 to Now”. This major reinstallation features around 150 postwar and contemporary works that seek to tell stories of art evoking the issues of identity, gender and power that have shaped and reshaped America. “History and the present have always been in flux,” Cosby says.

The Carnegie, like most institutions, has a history of overlooking contributions by artists beyond the canon but in recent years has made a concerted effort to refocus. It has in the past few years acquired almost 30 works by artists such as Melvin Edwards, Tseng Kwong Chi and Joan Semmel.

In a section of the exhibition entitled “Free Radicals”, is a work that recently entered the Carnegie’s collection: *Untitled (Gallery)*, a 2016 Kerry James Marshall painting of a black female figure staking her claim in a traditionally white space. The painting “asks us to reconsider the history of Western painting”, Cosby says

Another section of the show, “Less Than Half the Picture”, takes its name from another new edition to the museum’s collection, a 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster that reads: “You’re seeing less than half the picture without the vision of women artists and artists of color”.

To show a fuller vision of art and more of the stories of different American communities, the Baltimore Museum of Art has taken a radically different approach. The museum, which has a collection of 95,000 objects, recently announced that it will decommission and auction off works by important 20th-century white male artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Kline. The intended goal is to use the funds to better reflect the demographic realities of Baltimore, which is 63% African American, by buying works by artists of color and women.

The move is a correction, and it makes sense

“These men that we are deaccessioning, I looked at their work growing up because I had to,” said the artist Shinique Smith, who grew up in Baltimore, in a recent *Hyperallergic* article. “I had to do extra research beyond the museum to find artists of color. This move is a correction and, for the demographics in Baltimore, it makes sense. The museum should be for everybody.”

“The museum itself is always a statement of a belief system of a worldview,” said the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Director Michael Govan in a recent *In Other Words* podcast. “It has to be, because whenever you order objects in time and space, whether by geography or time or culture, you’re making a statement about your worldview.”



Installation view of “Passing through the Underworld: Egyptian Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)” at Vincent Price Art Museum, (until December 8, 2018). Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

For Govan this has meant taking the art in LACMA’s permanent collection to the Los Angeles’ local communities. “An artwork is subject to its frame—which is not just its physical frame but also its frame in the world: its context, who sees it, how it is seen,” he said. “There would be no overlap in audiences between Wilshire Boulevard, San Fernando Valley and South Los Angeles. None. You think about it: ‘Oh, do you have to send your collection *abroad* to have it seen by different people?’ No, maybe you just have to send it over the hill or down the avenue far enough in this spread out place.”

Govan is taking the museum on the road, much like the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which has partnered with The Underground Museum (a small institution in a predominantly black neighborhood that now has access to borrow works from MoCA’s permanent collection). LACMA has plans to build two “de-centered” museums in South Los Angeles. The new outposts will double as community centers and exhibition halls that will seek to reframe the *recherché* stories of that community as America’s own. “Art is very connected to people’s own sense of identity,” Govan said. “One of the things we are trying to do with the art museum is embrace the power of difference.”