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Museum Acquisitions of Work by Women Peaked a Decade Ago—and Have Stalled Since

Despite talk of progress, just 11% of all acquisitions have been of work by women
Just 11% of all acquisitions and 14% of exhibitions at 26 prominent American museums over the past decade were of work by female artists. According to a joint investigation by *In Other Words* and *artnet News*, a total of 260,470 works have entered the museums’ permanent collections since 2008. Only 29,247 were by women.

More troubling, there have been few advances made—even as museums signal publicly that they are embracing alternative histories and working to expand the canon. The number of works by women acquired did not increase over time. In fact, it peaked a decade ago.

These findings challenge one of the most compelling narratives to have emerged within the art world in recent years: that of progressive change, with once-marginalized artists being granted more equitable representation within art institutions. Our research shows that, at least when it comes to gender parity, this story is a myth.

“These numbers are a little heart-wrenching,” artist *Mickalene Thomas* says. “But they are also awakening. This is not about who you are as an artist—there is a system that you aren’t a part of. It’s still a boys’ game.”

**No growth**

![Auction Sales and Museum Acquisitions of Work by Women Over Time](image)

Click to zoom. Data visuals by Beatriz Lozano

Considering that women comprise more than half of Americans, these numbers are disturbingly low. Interestingly, the proportional representation of women in this data study correlates with last year’s research into African American artists: based on this country’s demographics, the findings were each a fifth of what they should be.

The minimal overlap between our two studies reveals the extent to which African American women are badly served by museums: they made up just 3.3% (190 of 5,832) of the total number of female artists whose work was collected by US institutions.

Unlike last year’s study, which showed museums had made clear (though limited) progress over time, there appears to have been an overwhelming lack of concentration on work by women. Only a handful of institutions we surveyed demonstrated the kind of consistency in their acquisitions and programs that suggest they are paying more than lip service to the issue.

“There is a perception that change has been so substantial when the reality is not that case,” says *Jessica Morgan*, the director of the Dia Art Foundation, one of only two institutions to have acquired more than 50% work by women over the
past decade. “There is such a huge imbalance that some kind of radical gesture is required.”

The business case for change

Risk and reward: an exhibition of work by the largely unknown female artist Hilma af Klint drove a 34% increase in museum membership and broke all attendance records at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York

Striving for equity is not just a matter of doing the right thing. Nor is it only about telling a more accurate history. It is also an important way for museums to ensure their own enduring relevance, and safeguard their financial viability.

“The public that you are selling to is not monolithic—it is not all white males,” says Susan McPherson, founder of McPherson Strategies consultancy and an expert on corporate social responsibility. “So if your viewpoint is narrow, you won’t be able to grow membership and your customer base.”

Indeed, fortune often favors the bold. An exhibition last year of work by a relatively unknown female painter—who had been largely ignored for decades by historians and the art market—ended up being the most-attended museum show in the Guggenheim’s history. The show of work by Swedish mystic artist Hilma af Klint also drew the youngest audience of any exhibition since the museum started to measure visitor demographics and drove a 34% increase in membership. (Click for more)

The public is often out ahead of the art world. “If you do a Gerhard Richter show, people think it will be a blockbuster,” says Helen Molesworth, the former chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. “It won’t be. Whereas Hilma will. Museums at the level of program and board are suffering from being behind the times.”

Slow-moving museums
Women have more often found a place in history as muses than creators. Artist Dora Maar is commonly referred to as one of Picasso’s lovers. (Maar, Double Portrait with Hat (c. 1936–37). The Cleveland Museum of Art)

There are a number of reasons why museums have failed to increase their representation of female artists. For one thing, their work is often seen as a specialist pursuit running parallel to the canonical story of art history. And many institutions share an unspoken belief that “they will only be recognized as an important institution if they acknowledge the greatest hits”, notes Maxwell Anderson, the president of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.
This bias may be built into the very structure of museums, whose identities are shaped by the objects they have collected in the past, suggests David Getsy, an art historian at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “Institutions have all these narratives about what makes them special, so for many of them this is about a reformist movement—which is slow and incremental—rather than revolutionary movement,” he says.

Another limiting factor is a lack of research about female artists, whose work was often not collected by major institutions during their lifetimes, tracked by historians, or conserved by art dealers. A recent study of Yale School of Art students found that even after graduation rates reached parity in the early 1980s, female alumni were written about in books and scholarly publications two to three times less frequently than their male peers.

This problem is more extreme for encyclopedic museums, which confront a dwindling amount of information the further back in time they look. Indeed, our data shows that, on average, these larger historical museums are collecting fewer works by women than their Modern and contemporary counterparts.

Yet our research also reveals that, when it comes to creating change, the type of institution is less important than its level of commitment to the cause. For example, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—which collects art from antiquity to the present—has been increasingly focused on bringing more gender parity to its permanent collection. Works by women represent 16% of its acquisitions over the past 10 years—4% more than the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and 7% less than the Museum of Modern Art in New York, two prominent Modern and contemporary museums on either coast with similar or larger operating budgets, during the same period. (LACMA also comes out ahead compared with many other historical museums; the MFA Boston, for example, collected just 4% work by women over the past decade.) (Click for more)

Real change requires checkbooks

Which works museums bring into their permanent collections matters because this is how history is remembered. (Alma W. Thomas, Greeting Card: give love brings peace (1971). The Baltimore Museum of Art © Estate of Alma W. Thomas)

What museums bring into their permanent collections matters because their acquisitions ultimately form the canon. Their collections are how history gets recorded for posterity—and also the place where bias is most deeply entrenched. “The great testament to the commitment an institution makes to an artist is through acquisitions, not exhibitions, which are sweeping and frankly cheaper,” says Christopher Bedford, the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Curators say they struggle to convince their acquisition committees to pay up for work, particularly by older, overlooked
female artists, who frequently lack an auction history that might be used to validate the asking price. “It can be difficult to defend the value of the work,” says Connie Butler, the chief curator at the Hammer Museum. “There is this weird disconnect that even while people are happy to support a show, the lack of auction records for female artists is a problem when you’re trying to support acquisitions.”

One curator described a meeting in which she pitched the work of an elderly female artist whose exhibition the museum had recently staged to great success. The committee decided against it, feeling that there were not enough market comparables. Instead, they bought a work by a “hot” young male artist.

Part of the reason that the balance of acquisitions is so difficult to shift is because they not only reflect purchases directed by curators, but also gifts from donors. In fact, gifts comprise more than twice the number of purchases we recorded. “A lot of institutions like ours don’t have significant acquisition budgets,” says Anne Pasternak, the director of the Brooklyn Museum. “Most of what you receive are gifts, and the trend is that people bought male artists.”

This trend is particularly evident in larger museums, which may be more likely to attract wealthy donors with the means and inclination to buy art that reflects the established canon, reinforcing the status quo. “A museum is a reflection of its collecting community,” says Nonie Gadsden, the MFA Boston’s senior curator of American decorative arts and sculpture, who organized “Women Take the Floor,” an ongoing exhibition dedicated to art by women (until 3 May 2021). “Artists with ‘known names’ are a lot easier for collectors, which means we have to try harder to acquire an artist who may not be as familiar.”

Smaller museums, meanwhile, are punching above their weight with regard to the representation of women: 14 of the 15 museums that had acquired fewer than 5,000 objects over the past decade collected more works by female artists than the 11% average.

**Playing the waiting game**

Those with the most power to create change seem to be the least interested in doing so. Several influential figures we spoke to, including museum leaders, were reluctant to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. They pointed to a growth in representation that is not evident in our data. They said change takes time. They wondered whether the numbers simply reflect that there are a disproportionate number of male artists, suggesting that women are more likely to put their careers on hold to raise families or quit in the face of a lack of opportunity.
The only artist to appear in the top ten of both our market and our museum data was Louise Bourgeois. (Here, I do (2010). The Baltimore Museum of Art © The Easton Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

“The excuses people give really tells us a lot about the power of art and the difficulty people have with change,” says Susan Fisher Sterling, director of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC. “We are lulled into a sense that
parity is being achieved faster than we think, but those myths reflect the status quo.”

Least surprised by the data were the artists themselves, who expressed frustration with a system that often asks them to meet a higher bar than their male peers to garner recognition or earn a museum show. “I have never had a museum come to me after a studio visit and say they like what I am doing and we should make a show of new work,” says photographer Catherine Opie. “I know Thomas Demand can make a new body of work and be shown at museums all over. Same with [Thomas] Struth and [Andreas] Gursky. But how many women get solo museum shows because they are making an interesting body of work versus a survey or retrospective?”

Artist Andrea Fraser says the statistics reflect a broader shift away from the civic mission of museums, some of which have become more interested in “mass-marketing of the taste of the wealthiest and most influential collectors” than “the idea that we need to educate the public and not cater to established tastes and the spectacle of fame or of genius”.

**Who is calling the shots?**

Part of the reason that the perception of progress is so much greater than the reality has to do with who is leading the charge: of the chief curators at the institutions we surveyed, the majority were female (23 women compared to 13 men). Overall, US museums employ more women than men—but, on the whole, those women earn less than their male colleagues. According to the 2017 National Museum Salary Survey, male chief curators make $71,050 on average, while women make $55,550.

And the corner offices remain male-dominated. Sixteen of the museums in our data set have male directors, compared to ten that employ female directors. The largest institutions are almost always run by men: of the country’s top 10 institutions by budget, only one has a female director (Kaywin Feldman of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC).

Notably, the museums with the highest proportion of exhibitions by women over the past decade—the Dia Art Foundation in New York (39%), the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (32%), and the Brooklyn Museum in New York (29%)—all have female directors. (Click for more)

However, our findings suggest that having women in leadership positions is not a cure-all. Surprisingly, perhaps, an analysis
of the boards of trustees at the 26 museums we surveyed revealed that almost half of their members—47%—are female.

“The art world is simply not the liberal, progressive bastion that it imagines itself to be,” Molesworth says, “and you can’t solve a problem you can’t own.” There is much well-meaning conversation taking place, but “really wanting change means doing it. It means righting the ship. It means you don’t get to do some other things—and it turns out that the not-doing-other-things is not really on the table for a lot of places.”

Making way for something new


Some museums have recognized the scope of the problem—and started to take decisive action. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts took a radical step in 2013 when it sold Edward Hopper’s East Wind Over Weehawken (1934) for $40.5 million. The museum did not make public at the time, but it planned to use the proceeds to strategically diversify its collection. Since then, it has acquired works by women at a rate of five times the national average. (Click for more)

Within the past two years, other museums, including the Baltimore Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, have followed suit. “The only way to catch up with decades of negligence is to be overly aggressive in the present,” Bedford says. In addition to selling work by canonized white men to diversify the museum’s collection, the institution recently announced that it will dedicate its entire 2020 program to female artists, from exhibitions of work by Joan Mitchell, Candice Breitz and Katharina Grosse to acquisitions and public programs.

There is a similar recognition of the need for change at SFMOMA, where 12% of acquisitions and 10% of exhibitions have been of work by women artists. “We know that we have real work to do to achieve a more balanced collection and program,” says Janet Bishop, chief curator and curator of painting and sculpture. “That work is an explicit goal within our new strategic plan.”
The recent $50.1m sale of a 1960 painting by Mark Rothko has allowed the museum to “make some real strides within the acquisitions arena”, specifically addressing historic gaps by buying work by artists including Leonora Carrington, Lygia Clark, Alma Thomas, Mickalene Thomas and Rebecca Belmore, Bishop says.

These purchases are already reshaping the way the museum tells the stories of major art movements. “Up until a few years ago, our Surrealist gallery included most of the major male figures associated with the movement but no paintings by women—we didn’t have any,” Bishop says. Today, the gallery features one work by Dorothea Tanning and one by Kay Sage.

The quota question

Such moves have been controversial among those who believe that privileging one group over another might lower the quality of the program or hamstring curators. “I’m worried the focus is skewing things to the point where we end up looking at artists in a gendered way rather than in terms of quality,” says the gallerist Dominique Lévy.

But others say that part of the reason the art world lags behind other sectors in dealing with issues of gender representation is because there is little external pressure and “no formal commitment, or metric by which to measure success”, says Mia Locks, senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

By contrast, public scrutiny and the #MeToo movement have helped drive change more quickly in film and other creative industries. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has committed to reaching gender parity by next year; just seven years ago, its membership was 77% male.

“I think we are going to have conversations that are uncomfortable for a lot of people about quotas,” says artist Micol Hebron. “There has been a quota of more men than women for centuries.”

Some museum leaders are on board. “I do believe in quotas,” says Morgan. “If change is not happening, then set yourself some goals.”

Real change vs illusions

A younger generation is not only more open to, but is also actively pushing for this kind of radical change. The #MeToo movement “was a real wake-up call for a younger generation who want to see equity in very specific ways”, says Butler—who was at the forefront of an earlier push for recognition of women artists when she curated the landmark exhibition “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” at MoCA, Los Angeles, in 2007. “They will demand something even more strongly than we did.”

But given the current perception gap between people’s sense of progress and the reality about the discernable lack of it, perhaps one of the key takeaways is that the stories we tell ourselves—about our museums and our societies—are not to be trusted. Institutions that are creating change say it is important to dig deeper and question more. “Don’t accept the first story. Or even the second or the third,” Morgan says. “It is only through repeated research that you get to understand what it is that you are looking at.”

The first step towards “addressing the problem is acknowledging where we actually are rather than where we perceive ourselves to be”, Locks says. “Then we can begin the real work of change.”

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