

Institutional Change and Equity-Based Museum Practice:  
A Case Study of the Crocker Museum

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Community Development

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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## ABSTRACT

Despite many of our cultural institutions claiming to be neutral and objective, the art museum is political. It is a space in which power is constructed, negotiated, and contested. Given the colonial foundations of the Western museum model, ongoing practices in museums often perpetuate a status quo built on extraction and exclusion. For many years, injustices in museum practice have been challenged by artists, community activists, and museum workers. Increasingly, museums have been pressured to acknowledge and transform racist and colonial logics that underpin decision making about how art is collected, interpreted, and shown. Using a case-study approach, this thesis examines how a single cultural institution, the Crocker Museum, has responded to demands for equity in museum practice. The voices and perspectives of local arts leaders and activists who operate outside of the institutional museum space play a pivotal role in this examination. Findings indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for tackling structural change in cultural institutions, but the Crocker Museum could continue to advance progress by working with the community to create a long-term comprehensive equity initiative, restructuring its hierarchical leadership model, and publicly addressing the controversial history of the museum.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends in the CDGG program, without whom this research would not have been possible. I have learned so much from all of you, and your friendship has made my graduate school experience endlessly juicy and delightful. I'll forever cherish our time together.

I am also extremely grateful to my mentors and advisors for offering their guidance and support throughout this journey. Thank you to Jonathan London for genuinely believing in me, for being there with your friendly ear and incredibly thoughtful insights, and for connecting me to the most amazing interview participants. Thank you to Jesse Drew for being a source of inspiration, for pushing me to ask the hard questions, and for providing me with employment throughout my graduate studies. Thank you to Alexandra Sofroniew for all of your support, it was your teachings and knowledge that inspired this thesis.

A special thank you to Rae Gouirand who nurtured my creative writing throughout graduate school. You have taught me so much about writing and being a human person with a beating heart.

Lastly, I would like to say thank you to my family for their lifelong support. Going back to school was one of the best gifts I have ever given myself, and it was all made possible because of you. Thank you to my partner Maya - for everything, always.

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## INTRODUCTION

For many decades, artists and activists have interrogated the relationship between museums and systems of oppression. Art museums have been forced (mainly by communities of color) to address colonialism's influence on the Western museum model and the impacts of structural racism on museum practice. Museums have been pushed to examine their collections' relationship to colonial enterprise and theft, their prioritization of the white male artist, their leadership structures that typically lack diversity in positions of power, their assumption of a white audience, and so on. In the wake of a global reckoning with systemic racism following the murder of George Floyd, the pressure on museums to transform has only intensified.

To respond to activists' increasing demands, museums across the country are experimenting with new hiring practices, rewriting strategic plans, and reimagining community engagement efforts. Some museums are going so far as to claim they are “actively decolonizing,” an assertion that has been challenged by many arts activists. As writer and independent researcher Sumaya Kassim warns, “as interest in decolonial thought grows, we must beware of museums’ and other institutions’ propensity to collect and exhibit because there is a danger (some may argue an inevitability) that the museum will exhibit decoloniality in much the same way they display/ed black and brown bodies as part of Empire’s collection” (Kassim, 2015, para. 10).

A central area of concern is whether transformational strategies will produce meaningful results or if major art museums are so embedded in oppressive systems that they will only end up co-opting activist language and justice-based practice or worse, simply use them as tools to sanitize their own image. This question can be situated within a broader question posed by curator Nina Finigan in an essay on power and resistance in the archive: “Are museums and

archives irredeemable colonial projects?” (Finigan, 2019 ). Building off Finigan’s inquiry, can we discuss changing museums without discussing changing the power structures upon which they and many of our institutions are built? How *does* institutional change happen? What are the barriers to change and how do they play out on a day to day basis? Scholars from multiple disciplines and museum theorists in particular (Wajid & Minott, 2019; Lynch, 2019; McFadzean, 2019) are increasingly taking up such questions regarding decolonization, institutional change, and the relationship between museums and surrounding communities. The literature reveals a need to continually evaluate and assess the changes museums are making in the name of dismantling colonial legacies and social inequalities.

This thesis explores limits, challenges, and opportunities in relation to institutional remaking in the art world. The project is built from the belief that structural change is not a linear process and requires constant evaluation informed by personal narratives. Given the enormity and complexity of the topic, these notions are examined at a local level using a case study of the Crocker Museum in Sacramento, CA. The Crocker makes for a useful case study because as the oldest art museum in the Western United States and the only art museum of its size in the Sacramento region, the institution holds enormous power in the local arts ecosystem. Through interviews with curatorial and engagement staff, this research examines how the Crocker Museum has responded to calls for museums to address colonial legacies and oppressive operating frameworks. Considering that outsider perspectives are crucial to the investigation of any institution, this thesis explores how arts leaders and activists in Sacramento view the Crocker and what prospects they see for change.

Institutions often rely on overarching policies that are not necessarily informed by individual stories or personal needs. In bringing in the reflections and viewpoints of a handful of



local arts leaders, my intention is to humanize significant issues facing the museum world, making them more manageable to confront. The case study approach allows for perspective on what it looks like for a museum to engage systemic issues in a natural, everyday context. The purpose of this work is to illustrate a nuanced view of one cultural institution in the larger context of shifting dynamics in art museums, identify what the broader implications are, and contribute recommendations for the Crocker based on local input.

The thesis is organized as follows: The first chapter consists of a historically minded review of literature and a discussion of the changing roles of art museums over time. In the second chapter, I discuss the methodological approach used in my case-study and the limitations of my research. In the third chapter, an overview of the history of the Crocker Museum is provided, including an examination of the link between colonialism and the museum's establishment. The final chapter contains the findings of my study, reflections, and recommendations for the Crocker.

## **CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of the literature review is to situate current transformations in museum practice within a historical context. I draw on past and present scholarship to briefly discuss the evolution of the art museum and to demonstrate how my own research fits into a broader and ever evolving discourse. While trends towards social justice in museums have attracted considerable academic interest, much of the discourse has taken place on the streets, in artist studios, in museum meeting rooms, and online. As such, this review contains the voices of art critics, museum workers, and activists in addition to museum studies scholars.

The first section of the literature review discusses links between the development of art museums and colonization. I explore how early art museums were not only influenced by colonialism, but actively played a role in perpetuating colonial ideology. The following section explores transformations in museum practice in the 20th century, specifically the shift from the idea of a museum as a neutral, objective institution to the acknowledgement of the museum as a political space in which power is reproduced and contested. I explore scholarship surrounding two controversial exhibits at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to demonstrate that recent changes in museum practice stem from many decades of organized protest and demands made by those most excluded from white cultural institutions. The final section of the literature review is concerned with the current state of politics in American art museums, here I discuss how modern museums are emerging as spaces for activism and decolonization with varying degrees of success.

## 1.2 Imperial Dominance, Colonization, and Early Museums

According to the International Council on Museums (ICOM), a museum is a “not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM, 2022). ICOM officially adopted this definition in August of 2022 following lengthy and divisive debate amongst committee members and experts within the organization. The definition, used by UNESCO and other entities around the world, plays a vital role in determining whether new galleries and institutions are able to describe themselves as an officially recognized museum.

The function of the modern museum has evolved significantly from its origins in 15th century Europe. During this time, wealthy individuals assembled what were then known as “Cabinets of Curiosities,” or private rooms used to store and display large collections of objects. Also known as Wunderkammern, these collections were often filled with “objects of empire,” or artifacts taken from other parts of the world during colonization (McCarthy, 2005). Wunderkammern were designed to represent Europe’s wealth and global power and to signify the elite social status of the collector. Looted objects were often displayed in a way that reinforced colonists’ negative, dehumanizing attitudes towards Eastern, African, and Indigenous cultures. For example, these cultural objects were often portrayed as primitive or uncivilized, reinforcing the notion of European superiority and exceptionalism.

Edward Said, regarded as the father of postcolonial theory, brilliantly emphasized culture's ability to not only mirror but also reinforce the agenda of colonialism through language and knowledge production (1978, 9):

“Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like "inferior" or "subject races," "subordinate peoples," "dependency," "expansion," and "authority. Out of the imperial experiences, notions about culture were clarified, reinforced, criticized, or rejected.”

Borrowing Said's logic, our earliest museums acted as agents of colonization not simply because they housed stolen objects, but because they believed in their own authority to define culture and ascribe value and meaning to such objects. In other words, objects were often taken out of their original cultural context and interpreted through a Eurocentric lens. According to Cooper (2008), the disruption of a nation's access to its own living touchstones, memory, and cultural practices is a crucial component of enforcing the larger agenda of colonialism. Thus, the West's desire to collect and interpret the world cannot be divorced from its broader ideological mission to dominate and control through colonization. “Cabinets of Curiosities,” arguably the predecessors of modern museums, set into motion the function of the museum as a container of colonial violence stewarded by and for the ruling class (Bennett et. al, 2017).

Colonial mentalities continued to inform collecting efforts in the West well into the 18th and 19th centuries. With the emergence of new academic disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, collecting efforts became more systematic and scientific, but were still heavily shaped by colonial attitudes and power dynamics. The practice of “salvage ethnography” emerged alongside these nascent disciplines, a practice that entailed European and American anthropologists rushing to collect and preserve data from Indigenous populations out of fear that

native cultures would soon disappear as a result of colonialism, genocide, and other forms of cultural decimation (Steinmetz, 2004).

The term “salvage ethnography” was coined by Franz Boas, a German-American social scientist considered to be the father of American anthropology. From Boas’s perspective, collecting cultural practices and objects was essential to preserving and celebrating the diversity of human experience. In 1907, he stated that museums “are the place where scientific materials from distant countries, vanishing species, paleontological remains, and the objects used by vanishing tribes, are kept and preserved for all future time, and may thus be made the basis of studies which, without them, would be impossible” (Boas as cited in Levinson, 1994). Boas’s efforts are often celebrated because his approach challenged earlier anthropological expeditions explicitly designed to uncover what made Europeans scientifically ‘superior’ to the Indigenous ‘other.’ In other words, he rejected scientific racism in favor of cultural relativism. However, critics argue that Boas and his followers' approach to Indigenous cultures remained inherently paternalistic. In the essay “Seeing like an Inca,” Christopher Heaney argues that the shift towards Boas’s cultural anthropology squashed alternative frameworks and attempts to do ethical justice to the collection of Indigenous remains in American art museums (Beoff 2020, Heaney 2018). The Boas school of thought believed Indigenous peoples were vulnerable to the impacts of Western civilization and therefore needed to be protected and preserved. As a result, Indigenous peoples were treated as specimens in their own homelands as anthropologists collected their cultural artifacts and bodies (both living and dead) for research (Lindholm, 2007; Morgan, 2018).

Numerous museums across America and Europe still possess collections of cultural and biological heritage belonging to Indigenous peoples that were originally gathered (often without consent) for use in exhibits at international expositions and world's fairs. These fairs were often

designed to showcase Indigenous peoples as “exotic” or “primitive” objects of curiosity rather than as human beings in possession of their own cosmologies, histories, and perspectives. These displays perpetuated harmful stereotypes on an international stage and further enforced racist conceptions of inferiority and superiority. The United States’ earliest museums were created from the closure of the world's fairs and the repurposing of their collections, which in effect institutionalized colonial interpretation and display practices (Rydell, 1987; Morgan, 2018 ).

### **1.3 20th Century: Changes and Challenges**

Despite being implicated in practices of political and racial control as discussed in the previous section, museums have waged a sustained effort to divorce themselves from the social, political, and environmental dynamics that surround them. In other words, museums have historically claimed to be objective, neutralized institutions that display factual representations of culture (Janes & Sandell, 2019). In the latter half of the 20th century, however, scholarship emerged that challenged notions of objectivity and reimagined the museum’s role in society. In the late 90s, museum scholar Stephen Weil wrote extensively about the slow erosion of neutrality and the total reshaping of the American museum, noting that the museum was changing from an “establishment like institution focused primarily inward on the growth, care, and study of its collections” to a more entrepreneurial institution largely concerned with providing educational services to the public (Weil, 1999).

The shift in focus occurred, according to Weil, on account of a variety of factors. First, a decline in public funding following the 1970s caused museums to rely more heavily on visitor-related income (entrance fees, gift shop revenue, etc.). Museums became increasingly invested in creating programming that appealed to a wide audience, and as a result, entirely new roles emerged dedicated to community engagement. Additionally, the professionalization of the

museum field resulted in a range of local and national organizations setting professional standards and cultural norms that favored public programming over “visible storage” (AAM cited in Weil, 1998). Finally, a growing emphasis on performance and outcome-based evaluation within funding apparatuses of the nonprofit sector forced the museum to define success by its external impact on visitors and the surrounding community rather than its collections or endowments (Weil, 1999).

Despite evolving trends in museum scholarship and curatorial practice, museums in the 20th century remained spaces overwhelmingly run by white males who exhibited white male artists. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (colloquially the Met) hosted an exhibition in 1984 titled *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture*, a supposed retrospective of the world’s most significant contemporary art. Amongst the 169 artists shown, all were white and from either the U.S. or Europe, and only 13 of the artists were women (Baumann, 2017).

*An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture* sparked protests outside of the museum and led to the formation of the Guerilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminist activist artists dedicated to fighting racism and sexism in the art world. The Guerilla Girls, still relevant today, collect data on discriminatory practices in the art world (how many women had solo shows at major US museums, how much they were paid, etc.), and then use culture-jamming tactics to promote these issues in the broader public’s consciousness. Culture-jamming refers to a number of sub-cultural practices designed to subvert or challenge dominant messages or values. This can take on a variety of forms such as media sabotage, billboard alterations, computer hacking, and graffiti (Klein, 2001). In 1989, the Guerilla Girls directly targeted the Met with a

billboard, citing the fact that women make up only 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections while accounting for 85% of the nudes on display.

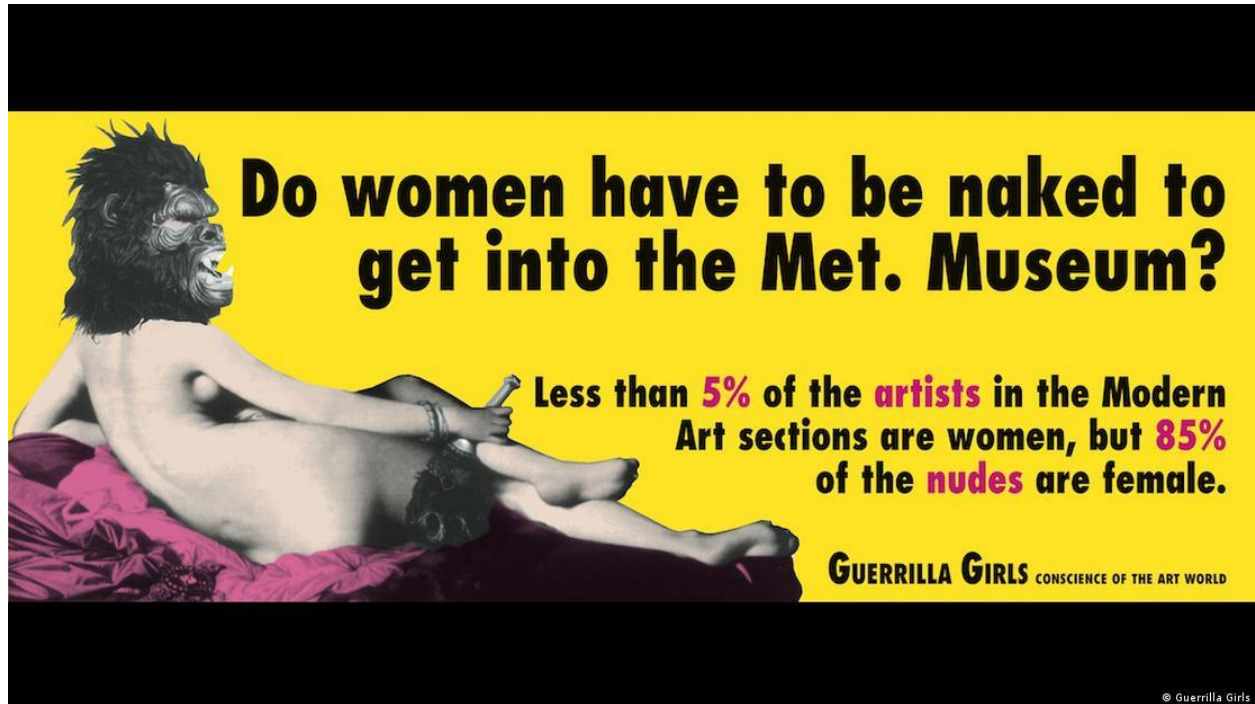


FIGURE 1 Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum? SOURCE: Guerilla Girls

The Guerilla Girls, while unique in approach and style, emerged from a broader context of arts related activism in postwar America. In fact, the Met had already long been at the center of controversies regarding gender, race, and representation in the mainstream art world. In 1969, the Met staged one of the most controversial art exhibitions in U.S. History. *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968* aimed to celebrate the rich cultural history of the predominantly Black community of Harlem, bring previously ignored Black audiences into the museum, and ignite productive dialogue between Black and white communities at a time of intensifying racial tension in New York City. Despite assembling a staff that included Black curators and organizing community advisory committees made up of Black cultural leaders and experts, the show failed in striking ways (D'Souza, 2020).



Objections from the Harlem community began to arise early on in the planning process. Initially, community members were angered by the fact that the head curator, Allon Schroener, was a white man with few ties to Harlem. Schroener's attempt to include Black voices on the curatorial team was also met with skepticism as neither of the two Black curators assigned to the project were Harlem residents, and thus were seen as deficient in terms of contributing meaningful insight about the neighborhood. Further, the members of the community advisory committees expressed frustrations to Schroener and the director of the Met that while their voices were technically being heard, no actions were being taken to implement any of their ideas.

The bulk of the outrage, however, stemmed from the fact that the first-ever exhibition of African-American culture at The Met included not one Black artist. As Cooks (2007) observes, "Near the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the beginning of the Black Power Movement, Black culture emerged in the Metropolitan not as creative producer but as ethnographic study. The decisions to display African American people through oversized photo-murals and to dismiss their input and artwork as unworthy of being in the museum made *Harlem on My Mind* a site for racial politics and debates about artistic quality and art versus culture in the United States" (p.6 ). Such an overt ethnographic approach to Black culture is reminiscent of the colonial practices discussed in a previous section of this review, whereby communities of color are only included in the museum space as either subjects or specimens.

Protests amassed in advance of the exhibition's opening and were led by the newly formed Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), a multi-generational advocacy group that would go on to play a major role in arts activism in the following years. D'Sousza (2020) notes that the BECC's key indictment was that "the Met was disrespecting Black people by having the story of Harlem culture told exclusively through the medium of photography— a medium that was

still not considered “art” by most traditional museums” (p. 67). The exhibition did introduce photographs by Gordon Parks and James Van Der Zee, now famous chroniclers of Black culture, but in the eyes of the BECC, the presence of Black photographers did not make up for the absence of Black artists (D’Souza, 2020).



*FIGURE 2 Harlem on My Mind Protesters, including Romare Bearden and Richard Mayhew, in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 1969. SOURCE: UNKNOWN*

The protests gained major momentum during the initial days of the exhibition, with other protest groups, museum visitors, and influential New Yorkers joining the picket line. Despite the public controversy, the exhibition was overwhelmingly well attended, much to the disappointment of the BECC and other activists. The impact of the protests, however, cannot be

understated. For one, the exhibition galvanized Black cultural activists to organize their demands for power and representation in predominantly white art spaces and to go after other institutions such as the Whitney. Additionally, the controversy caused local politicians to refuse support for the Met's proposed expansion unless the museum could demonstrate a plan for a more effective sharing of its resources. As a result, trustees formed a committee "to study the cultural communities not directly served by the Met or other major art museums" (Cahan cited in D'Souza, 2020). In the ensuing years, art from the museum's collection was lent to community organizations and smaller museums in NYC, internship and educational opportunities were developed off-site, and a training program was created for minority groups interested in pursuing careers in museums. Further, the committee would go on to oversee the development of three new art museums – the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Staten Island, and the Queens Center for Art and Culture (D'Souza, 2020).

*Harlem on My Mind*, despite its failures, made visible the struggle for Black representation in American art and ignited further conversation about the overwhelming presence of whiteness in major cultural institutions. Though considering that nearly 15 years later, the Met exhibited the highly controversial *An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture* that resulted in the formation of the Guerilla Girls, equity in museum practice cannot be viewed as a fixed endpoint, but rather an ongoing and ever-evolving struggle between institutions and the communities they purport to serve.

## 1.4 21st Century: Repatriation and BLM

In 2019, Routledge published *Museum Activism*, an anthology of current museum scholarship focused on activist-based trends and thought within the museum field. The literature suggests that museums, more than ever, are expressing intent to act upon past injustices, social inequalities, and environmental crises. For instance, in 2016, the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) strategic plan included diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) as one of three goals considered by the membership to be vital to museums' viability, relevance, and sustainability of museums (AAM, 2017). In 2019, AAM developed an initiative called "Facing Change" designed to support museums' efforts to diversify their boards of trustees following an internal report that revealed nearly half of all museum boards were 100% white (Lott, 2022).

As efforts in major institutional organizations such as AAM demonstrate, concerns regarding equity, social justice, and the impacts of colonialism on museum practice have moved from the margins to the core (Nightingale, 2012). Repatriation, or the return of cultural objects to a nation or community, has become an increasingly visible and central component of these concerns. Tythacott & Arvanitis (2014) argue that repatriation's "[...] current high profile reflects changing global power relations and the increasingly vocal criticisms of the historical concentration of the world's heritage in the museums of the West" (p. 1).

Current repatriation practices can be traced back to a 1970 UNESCO watershed ruling that prohibits the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property. While not a formal legal document, most major museums in the West abide by the 1970 convention and generally do not acquire new material from other countries without full documentation (Herman, 2020). However, in 2002, the directors of eighteen of Europe and America's largest art museums signed the "Declaration on the Importance and Universal Value of Museums," a statement that

espouses museums as universal institutions tasked with maintaining cultural objects for the benefit of all. The declaration reads: “We should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation.” According to Adams (2020), the declaration is often cited in arguments against repatriation. It is no coincidence that the signers of the declaration (the Louvre, the Getty, the Met, to name a few) are museums that continue to make headlines for failing to return looted artworks to their countries of origin.

In 1990, U.S. Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a law that recognized the harmful treatment of Native American remains and established a process for Tribes to assume ownership from museums and other institutions. A ProPublica investigation published this year reveals that over 600 federally funded U.S. institutions still possess Indigenous remains (with UC Berkeley holding the largest amount) “in part because of a lack of federal funding for repatriation and because institutions face little to no consequences for violating the law or dragging their feet” (ProPublica, 2021). The results of ProPublica’s investigative report illustrate that despite increasing activist pressure on major art museums in the 21st century, colonial narratives remain deeply ingrained in decision making and practice.

It’s not only the enduring presence of colonialism that is causing American art museums to come under public fire. In 2019, artist Nan Goldin’s activist group P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) littered a sea of faux OxyContin prescriptions across the floor of the Guggenheim as an act of protest against the museum’s financial ties to the Sackler family. This action, coupled with similar protests at other museums, has forced arts institutions to reckon with the ethics of funding the arts through the sales of deadly pharmaceuticals. P.A.I.N. maintains that the opioid-crisis driven fortune would be better spent on treatment and harm

reduction than on museum wings. Many museums rely substantially on funding from major corporate donors and support is often recognized in the form of placards bearing the donor's name. A number of museums have since removed the Sackler name from public wings and galleries, but few have mentioned the returning of Sackler funds (Anderson, 2021). Assessing the long-term implications for museums, Glazek (2019) argues that "museums should wonder whether they're putting future fundraising at risk by keeping tainted money and thereby becoming identified in the public imagination as fronts for laundering reputations."

The pressure on museums to become more ethical, just institutions has only intensified following mass protests for racial justice in 2020. Activist organizations like Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives as well as countless others inspired renewed scrutiny over the lack of support for Black life and culture in all aspects of American society. Cultural institutions around the world reacted in varying degrees ranging from silence, to posting statements of solidarity on social media, to making commitments to diversify leadership and overhaul programming. In 2022, the Mellon Foundation published the findings of a multi-year survey that gathered demographic data from 328 museums across North America. The results (refer to Appendix I) confirm overall gains in diversifying the museum workforce, especially in elevating women to leadership roles, although people of color (POC) still represent under one-fifth of leadership positions overall.

Current museum scholarship, such as the 2019 anthology *Museum Activism*, celebrates not only how activists have inspired museums to transform, but also how museums around the globe are emerging as social and civic forces for good. For example, the chapter *Museums in the Age of Intolerance* highlights how museums are increasingly engaging with activists and community organizations. To illustrate this point, Heal (2019) mentions how the Tate Modern

invited the Museum of Homelessness, a conceptual museum and advocacy organization, to host their first ever event inside the walls of the Tate. This event increased the platform of the Museum of Homelessness and enabled the organization to put artists and activists who typically operate outside of the mainstream into a high-profile institution such as the Tate. Efforts by museums to diversify leadership, deepen community partnerships, and transform their role in society have been widely documented. Very little academic research, however, has investigated whether real structural change is taking place or if cultural institutions are simply cosmetically rebranding in order to appear relevant. In the ensuing chapters, I hope to clarify this distinction and to situate it within the context of the Crocker Museum.

As this literature review has highlighted, museums arose in tandem with imperial conquest and the development of modern nation states. Cultural institutions in the West have played a key role in reinforcing colonial ideologies by canonizing Euro-American art while systematically degrading art and artists from Eastern, African, and Indigenous nations. Within this framework, humanity is conflated with the notion of 'European.' The act of othering art from the global majority, whether by treating Black and brown bodies as specimens or objects of an ethnographic gaze or excluding them altogether from the museum space, reinforces a narrative of naturalized European domination. A contemporary byproduct of this process can be seen in the way museums are prone to white-wash or ignore such historical realities, instead claiming to be neutral arbiters of culture. Demands for repatriation and representation have been made since the early days of art museums, were bolstered by various social movements of the 20th century, and continue to take on new forms today as questions concerning race, state violence, and tainted money envelop the art world.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In regards to the design of this study, I chose a qualitative approach with the intention of producing a nuanced, narrative based analysis of the Crocker Museum. I wanted to design a study that would produce useful results for the arts community in Sacramento. I wanted to be able to hand a document to the Crocker that contains useful feedback from leaders in the community, and I also hoped to be able to turn the results into an accessible piece of media that could be distributed to the public. The design of my project reflects these goals, as well as my own research outlook, which can be explained with the help of feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theorists challenge the belief that politics inherently harm knowledge production, argue that all knowledge is socially situated based on historical context and positionality, and focus research on power relations and dominant institutions (T. Powell, n.d.).

This theory undergirds my own relationship to research as this project is inspired by feminist standpoint scholars (Donna Haraway and Dorothy Smith for e.g.) who place value on examining race and power relations in institutional contexts. Feminist Standpoint Theory calls for a shift in how research is conducted and knowledge is generated. This framework suggests that researchers should actively seek out the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups and center their voices and knowledge in the research process. My desire to conduct in-depth and loosely structured interviews was influenced by the way in which this theory challenges the notion of objectivity and argues for the importance of subjectivity and personal experiences in producing knowledge.

In the initial design of this study, I was seeking to speak with Crocker Museum employees and community leaders invested in advancing activism in the arts. I did not create explicit interview criteria based on race, class, or gender because I assumed that interviewing



individuals working on behalf of equity in cultural institutions would naturally produce a diverse data set. Predictably so, I exclusively spoke with individuals who represent groups most excluded from arts institutions. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, I believe that this allowed for a more useful data set because I was able to draw comparisons between the Crocker Museum's perspectives and the perspectives of those most often marginalized by art museums. A detailed demographic breakdown of interview participants can be found in Appendix II.

I was born in London, England and raised in a high income suburb outside of Chicago, Illinois. Because my family had the financial means and available time, I had the opportunity to visit museums at a young age, experiencing a wide range of art institutions in both Europe and the United States. I also grew up with access to an education that further exposed me to art history and media theory. As a person who is white, highly educated, and comes from an affluent background, I represent the demographic that art museums have historically catered to for decades. As a result, I have mostly felt comfortable and welcomed in these spaces. As a woman and a queer person, I haven't always seen myself reflected in the art or artists featured on museums' walls, but thankfully this is changing. All of the above has, no doubt, influenced this study. In this thesis, I am discussing racism and equity in museums from a place of intellectual understanding more than lived experience. These two things are very different and they produce different kinds of knowledge.

## **2.2 Methods**

Because I wanted to conduct an in-depth analysis of one institution, I decided to use the qualitative research methodology known as a case study. Sagadin (1991) states that a "case study is used when we analyse and describe, for example each person individually (his or her activity, special needs, life situation, life history, etc.), a group of people (a school department, a group of

students with special needs, teaching staff, etc.), individual institutions or a problem (or several problems), process, phenomenon or event in a particular institution, etc. in detail” (p. 31).

Looking into one institution is valuable because it allows for a richer and more nuanced perspective on what it means for a museum to grapple with social justice issues. I decided to study the Crocker because as the only AAM accredited art museum of its size in the Sacramento region, it wields considerable power and influence. Additionally, I value doing research in my own community, and I saw this project as a way to better understand the place I call home. In terms of data collection, I conducted six in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were divided into two categories: (1) Crocker Museum employees and (2) Arts leaders in Sacramento. As a Community Development student and a researcher who is interested in the relationship between institutions and communities, I felt that it was essential to include the voices of arts leaders and activists from the community who are not professionally affiliated with the Crocker Museum. In doing so, I was able to collect ideas and perspectives that an employee of the Crocker might not have or feel comfortable sharing. I aimed to speak with a diverse group of individuals who are/have:

- (1) Arts leaders in the Sacramento community
- (2) A vested interest in advancing justice in the arts
- (3) Professional experience with the Crocker

Interview participants were found through personal connections and recommendations. I conducted a total of six interviews (three with Crocker employees and three with local arts leaders), all of which lasted around one hour. Two of my interviews with Crocker employees took place in person at the museum, whereas the rest of the interviews took place on Zoom.

Interviews were semi-structured using open ended questions. Below are sample questions that guided my conversations, but the table is not intended to represent all of the topics covered.

<b>For Crocker Employees</b>	<b>For Arts Leaders</b>
1. Personal role, responsibility, duration at the Crocker?	1. How do you define your role in the Sacramento arts community?
2. In your perspective, has the museum evolved in the light of BLM and 2020 in terms of staffing, exhibits, engagement, etc.?	2. Do you see your work existing in tandem with the Crocker or outside of it?
3. How does the Crocker define its community?	3. How would you describe your perception of the Crocker's collection and public programming?
4. How would you define the museum's relationship with local community orgs and artists?	4. In your view, how well does the Crocker engage local artists? The community at large? Marginalized populations?
5. How does being owned by the city impact social justice related efforts?	5. In your view, does the museum challenge elitist and racist narratives so commonly found in art museums?
6. Has there been any internal dialogue about the darker elements of the Crocker's history? Has there been public or curatorial address of the history?	6. Do you feel represented at the Crocker? Why or why not?
7. Does the Crocker have a specific initiative or long-term plan regarding equity?	7. How do you think the Crocker can improve?

### **2.3 Limitations**

This being a Master's thesis, time-constraints dictated the overall scope of this project. The data reflects personal, in-depth perspectives on a single issue and is not representative of the entire Sacramento arts scene nor any particular group. I only spoke with a few staff members from the Crocker, so this data set also does not represent the institution as a whole. If I had had

more time, I would have liked to speak with more arts leaders and activists in the community. I also would have liked to gather the perspectives of people in high leadership positions at the museum (board members, directors, etc.) as well as the perspectives of former Crocker employees. Because of my research design, I am unable to draw a single, finite conclusion. Instead, the results of this case study represent narrative-based insights about the Crocker Museum situated in the context of an ever-evolving dialogue between museums and those fighting for justice in the arts.

This case study focuses on the perspectives of Crocker employees and the perspectives of external arts leaders. What is missing from this conversation are (1) the perspectives of Crocker Museum visitors and (2) the perspectives of Sacramento community members who do not visit the Crocker. These data sets were excluded because of the time required to design and collect visitor surveys and the inherent logistical challenges in locating and speaking to people who do not visit museums. The issue of ‘audience’ is hugely important and very much a part of criticisms directed towards art museums. Museums typically operate from the ideal of being for everyone, but demographic discrepancies continue to persist between museum visitors, staff, leadership, artists, and the public as a whole. Studying these discrepancies, particularly visitors and non-visitors, falls outside the scope of my case study. While this research does not contain the voices of visitors or non-visitors, the issue of audience did arise tangentially in my conversations with interviewees and I have folded their insights into the analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3: THE CROCKER MUSEUM**

This case study examines the Crocker Art Museum, the oldest public art museum in the Western United States. The Crocker is located at 216 O street in downtown Sacramento on the traditional land of the Nisenan people. The Museum is a public-private partnership between the city of Sacramento and the Crocker Art Museum Association (CAMA). The original Crocker Art Gallery opened in 1885 adjacent to the Crocker family's mansion, which still stands today. The gallery was renamed The Crocker Art Museum in 1978. In 2010, the museum underwent a major expansion, which added more gallery space for rotating shows and the Museum's Education Center which includes space for student and community exhibitions, an expanded Gerald Hansen Library, the Art Education Resource Room, and Tot Land. The current mission of the Crocker Museum is “to promote an awareness of and enthusiasm for human experience through art” (Crocker Art Museum, 2023).

### **3.1 The Origins of the Crocker Museum**

The common narrative associated with the development of the Crocker Museum focuses on the benevolent, philanthropic actions of Edwin Bryant (E.B.) and Margaret Crocker. After amassing an enormous fortune from investment in the Central Pacific Railroad, E.B. and his wife Margaret traveled to Europe where they purchased an estimated \$400,000 collection of fine art. Back home in Sacramento, the collection was used to establish the Crocker Art Gallery in the lot adjacent to their mansion (Ball, 1955).

Both E.B. and Margaret were ardent abolitionists, and Margaret in particular invested a lot of time and money into civic and social causes. Known as Sacramento’s “lady bountiful,” she gave land to the city for a school playground, founded a free floral shop, donated housing and an endowment to a womens’ house, and when she eventually moved to New York, she bequeathed

her home to a shelter for unmarried mothers (Ball, 1955). Her most enduring philanthropic act was to present what would become the Crocker Museum and the bulk of its collections to the City of Sacramento and the newly formed California Museum Association in May 1885 (Crocker Art Museum, 2023).

In the following section, I will reveal the subterranean elements of this narrative by outlining how the Crockers' massive fortune was built upon the colonization of the West, the murder and displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of Chinese immigrants. While the collections found in the Crocker Museum today serve a social and educational purpose, they also arguably represent the living embodiment of the founders' greed and power. Although essential to understanding the full scope of the museum, this piece of the Crockers' history is often overlooked or obscured.

Edwin Bryant Crocker was born on April 26, 1818 in Jamesville, New York. Crocker earned a Bachelor's degree in Engineering before spending three years laying out railroad lines for the Albany and Schenectady Railroad. In 1852, Crocker followed his older brother to California where he became well known as an anti-slavery lawyer and a founder of the state's Republican party. He was appointed to the State Supreme Court in 1863, but left the bench several months later to serve as legal counsel for the establishment of the Central Pacific Railroad (Ball, 1955).

The Central Pacific Railroad was an American railroad company founded in 1861 by a group of enterprising railroad tycoons. Sometimes referred to as the "Big Five," the group included Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and E.B. and Charles Crocker (Bain 2000). The Big Five are best remembered for having built part of the first American transcontinental rail line. Both E.B. and Charles Crocker were instrumental in the Central Pacific

Railroad company. E.B. served as a director and provided legal expertise, while Charles oversaw the construction of the railroad. The transcontinental railroad is often celebrated as a symbol of American ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and progress. The mainstream narrative, however, glosses over the relationship between the railroad and settler-colonialism. Manu Karuka, an American Studies scholar whose work centers on critiques of imperialism, defines settler colonialism as “a type of colonialism that replaces existing, Indigenous communities and ways of relating to the land with settler populations, and settler ways of life” (Vong, 2019).

The Crockers were directly involved in facilitating the capture of Indigenous lands and peoples. Karuka (2019) argues that “state and corporation supplied the organizational basis for colonialism in nineteenth-century California. Neither could be disentangled from the other. Leland Stanford was president of the Central Pacific Railroad while serving as the first Republican governor of California. The first locomotive in service for the Central Pacific was christened the “Governor Stanford.” In 1863, Governor Stanford appointed Edwin Bryant Crocker, elder brother of Charles (the superintendent of Central Pacific construction), as a justice of the California Supreme Court. A year later, E.B., “the Judge,” as his associates hailed him, became chief counsel for the Central Pacific, joining the circle of directors [...]” (p. 100). Edwin Crocker, as legal counsel for the railroad, lobbied U.S. Congress to grant the company millions of acres of land that (as per ratified treaties) belonged to Indigenous nations. Thus, the railroad was built on Tribal lands, and its construction led to the displacement and forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands. The railroad also facilitated the settlement of white Americans in the West, leading to further displacement of Tribes and the colonization of their lands (Karuka, 2019).

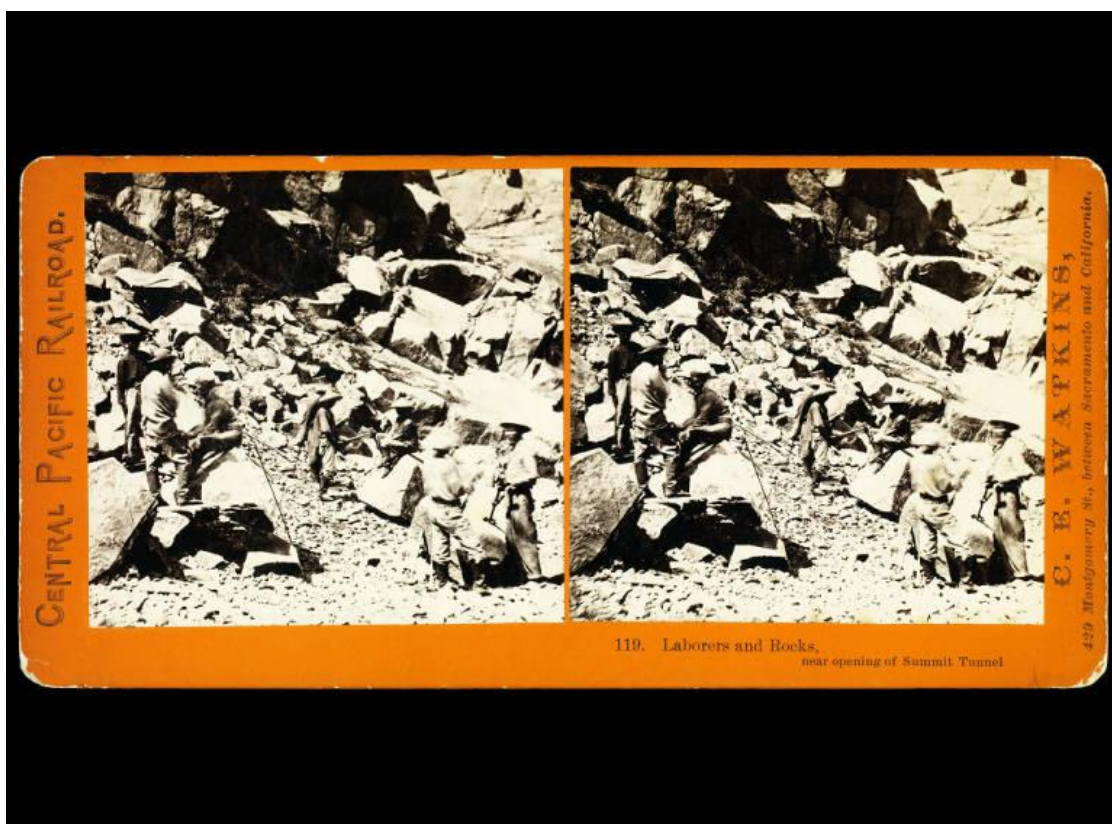
The possibility of Indigenous resistance to the railroad posed many risks to investors like the Crocker, and as a result, the U.S. military was enlisted to ensure the completion of the project. The Army occupied Indigenous communities, destroyed villages, and cut off access to foodways. They assassinated Tribal leaders, removed children from their families, and attempted to destroy vital resources such as the buffalo. Infrastructure also played a crucial role as the railroads themselves enabled settlers to transport manpower and supplies across great distances in harsh weather. Despite all of this, Indigenous communities resisted by attacking military posts, settler villages, and construction camps. In 1867, Cheyenne raids successfully led to a temporary halt in the construction of the railroad. The building eventually resumed, however, and the project was completed in 1869.

In addition to contributing to the advancement of settler colonialism and the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the Crocker's work with Central Pacific was also tied up in the exploitation of Chinese laborers. The Central Pacific struggled with labor shortages, especially in regards to laying track through rugged mountain passes in the Sierra Nevadas. E.B. Crocker petitioned the federal government to allow the use of five-thousand Confederate prisoners as laborers, and when this failed on account of the end of the war, he turned his attention towards Chinese migrants (Ball, 1955). At this time, federal law prohibited U.S. citizens from bringing Chinese laborers into the U.S., but the law was rarely enforced. In 1862, the California state legislature passed the Anti-Coolie act which established a monthly tax on Chinese people working in the mines or running businesses. In the federal law, the term "coolie" referred to a condition of labor, whereas California used "coolie" to legislate an inferior racial status. Karuka (2019) explains that "in the federal anti-coolie law, the U.S. government asserted territorial



prerogatives to control borders, in the California law, the state distinguished Chinese people as a significant source of state revenue” (p. 83).

E.B. Crocker was responsible for the hiring of Chinese laborers, and Charles played a key role in negotiating their low wages and overseeing brutal working conditions. Whereas Irish workers received room, board, and \$2 a day, Chinese laborers, derisively called “Crocker’s pets,” worked from sunrise to sunset under life-threatening conditions for roughly \$1 a day and no room or board. Laborers were sometimes beaten and withheld from terminating employment, in effect working as indentured servants. Countless laborers died while building the railroad, although the true cost of life will never be known as no records were kept (Chinn 1969, Karuka 2019).



*FIGURE 3 Laborers and Rocks, near opening of Summit Tunnel. Photo Credit: Alfred Hart*  
*SOURCE: The Huntington Digital Library*

In June of 1867, thousands of Chinese workers went on strike, demanding \$40 per month and a ten-hour work day. In regards to the strike, Kaurka (2019) emphasizes “it was a war for control. It was not only a class war over the conditions of work. It was also a war to decide who would colonize California, and on what terms [..]” (p. 92). In response to the strike, E.B. Crocker devised a plan to flood the California labor market with Freedmen from the South in order to create a racialized division of labor. In letters exchanged with Mark Hopkins, Crocker is quoted saying “a Negro market would tend to keep the Chinese quiet.” Awareness of their own dispensability, he argued, was “the only remedy for strikers” (Steiner, 1988). The plan to bring in Black workers from the South failed, and instead of meeting the worker’s demands, the directors of Central Pacific decided to bust the strike by preventing food and other supplies from reaching the laborers. With little recourse, the strikers returned to work and finished the railroad in 1869.

Following the completion of the transcontinental railroad and amidst mounting pressure from unions, U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, effectively banning Chinese emigration to America and calling for the deportation of Chinese immigrants who arrived after 1880. Charles Crocker testified at the Congressional hearing on behalf of Chinese migrants, arguing that “without Chinese labor we would be thrown back in all the branches of industry, farming, mining, reclaiming lands, and everything else” (Hoar 1882 cited in Zhang 2019, p. 26). Crocker, during the hearing, also advocated for the allowance of Chinese migrants so that white Americans could focus on “an elevated class of work” (Bee 1886 quoted in Zhang 2019, p. 26). Although Crocker was part of a small minority of U.S. citizens who spoke out publicly against the Chinese Exclusion Act, his comments represent an articulation of the particular kind of racialized capitalism that was prevalent in the 19th century and undergirded the accumulation of the Crockers’ wealth. Racialized capitalism refers to the idea that “certain racial identities have

been (and continue to be) central to the development of planetary-wide economic architectures, particularly in the centuries following the European “discoveries” of the so-called New World” (Prasad, 2022, p.2). In the following chapter, I will discuss the modern Crocker Museum’s relationship to the historical narrative presented here.

### **3.2 Public Programming & The Crocker Museum Today**

Today the Crocker Museum maintains a significant collection of Californian art, dating from the Gold Rush to the present day, a collection of master drawings, European paintings, and one of the largest international ceramics collections in the U.S. and collections of Asian, African, and Oceanic art. Whereas the historic Crocker building displays art from the permanent collection, the Teel Family Pavilion (built in 2010) hosts numerous rotating exhibitions throughout the year. The main gallery is on the top floor of the pavilion with smaller gallery spaces featured on the floors below. The basement of the Teel houses community and student exhibitions, a play space for young children (Tot Land), a library, and an art education center. ArtMix, ArtArk, and Block by Block are three current components of special event and community engagement programming.

The emergence of these three programs paralleled wide-scale evolutions in museum practice towards education and community programming. ArtArk, a mobile art education center, came to being in the 1980s as museums were beginning to focus their efforts on education and outreach. In 2017, the Crocker Museum was awarded a \$227,909 Museums for America matching grant in support of further developing the Block by Block program (Matsui, 2017). The Crocker had previously collected data on which zip codes in Sacramento were not engaging with the museum and established Block by Block in response to the data. The project was designed to

increase access to the arts at the community level by curating pop-up art education experiences outside of the walls of the museum.

### *ArtMix*

ArtMix is a monthly 18+ night party at the Crocker that features live DJs, performances, food and alcohol, and artmaking. Every ArtMix party centers on a different theme, with past events ranging from drag and burlesque to a Halloween themed zombie prom.

### *Block by Block*

The Crocker Art Museum’s Block by Block (BxB) initiative “seeks to enhance cultural participation and quality of life throughout Sacramento’s urban core through hyper-local, community-led experiences that promote interconnectivity and arts engagement” (Crocker Museum, 2023). Block by Block has partnered with the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, Promise Zone, and community organizations such as the Roberts Family Development Center, Sol Collective, Sojourner Truth African American Museum, and 916 Ink. Since 2015, Block by Block has engaged more than 50,000 community members, 400 artists, and employed an ever-growing number of “art-ivists” through its youth Street Team and Block by Block Fellowships (Crocker, Museum, 2023).

### *ArtArk*

The Art Ark is a 50-foot mobile art center that was created in 1980 and designed to extend the museum’s reach into local public schools. The ArtArk aims to supplement classroom arts education, and so far over 200,000 students have interacted with the ArtArk. Recently, in partnership with Block by Block, the ArtArk was repurposed to serve visitors of all ages and has taken up residence at four community hubs around Sacramento. These hubs include the Oak Park

Community Center, Leataata Floyd Elementary School, Maple Neighborhood Center, and Valley Hi.

These three programs represent the museum's attempt to broaden its reach in the Sacramento community by extending the museum's services beyond the confines of its building. Many art museums across the country have similar mobile-art programs that travel to schools, organizations, and neighborhoods. Public programming efforts such as these, even when well-designed and successful, cannot contend with the reality that many people do not engage with art museums simply because they do not have the time or financial resources required. The realities of living in an unfettered U.S. capitalist system means that many people are forced to work multiple jobs in order to provide for themselves and their families, leaving little time or money for activities such as visiting an art museum. Even eliminating entrance fees for EBT users, as the Crocker and other art museums have done, fails to contend with the time barrier.

Although museums have limited influence over overarching financial systems and class politics, the way in which a museum plans and executes community engagement plays a crucial role in determining its level of success and social responsibility. The data presented in the following section is used to examine the programmatic efforts and institutional framework of the Crocker Museum in order to identify where space for improvement exists.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### 4.1 Interviews with Arts Leaders

Interview data offers a diverse set of perspectives on the Crocker Museum's role in the Sacramento community and its effectiveness in living up to demands for justice in museum practice. The voices of arts leaders and activists are presented here using the pseudonyms Alex, Rose, and Leo. What emerged through these conversations is not one unifying solution, but rather a collection of ideas, criticisms, and personal reflections that can be put towards recommendations for the museum.

#### *The Crocker Museum and the City of Sacramento*

Considering that the Crocker Museum is owned by the city of Sacramento, I asked interview participants to speak on the relationship between city government and the museum. I also asked more generalized questions about the city's art scene. Alex explained that a lot of her work involves pushing the city and the traditional arts ecosystem (the Crocker, Sacramento Philharmonic and Opera, Broadway Sacramento, and the Sacramento Ballet) towards equity and "towards working for the money that they already receive." She shared that she believes the city has greatly improved in this regard following an onslaught of criticisms about how public arts funding is allocated (the city spent millions of dollars on a Jeff Koons sculpture for instance). She believes that the city is outpacing the Crocker Museum in terms of equity-fluent arts programming.

Rose, on the other hand, expressed frustration that there is no designated line item in the city's budget for arts and culture. As a result, any amount of money that the city commits to the arts is considered extra, and anything extra will always be the first to be cut. Rose also commented on the lack of cultural appreciation for the arts in Sacramento. "It's lame that we

can't support more than two visual arts organizations in a region of this size." The Crocker operates on a 10+ million dollar budget and Verge Center for the Arts, the second largest visual arts organization in the region, operates on a \$750,000 budget. Rose emphasized that visual arts organizations in Sacramento are opening and closing all of the time due to a lack of cultural support. Referring to the Crocker, she said "trying to maintain something of that size in a market like this is crazy."

### *Perspectives on Programming*

Alex believes that the Crocker has made significant progress in evolving towards equity and inclusion, but she also expressed the opinion that the museum has been slightly off track since the gray square incident and the subsequent loss of key staff who had been working towards these goals. The Crocker Museum, in response to the racial justice uprising following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, posted an image of a gray square on social media accompanied by a tepid directive to imagine a fair and just world. The gray square, viewed as both a declaration of neutrality and non-committal in its institutional support for Black life, angered and upset many in the community.

The public misstep resulted in many conversations about the museum's relationship to the Black community both within and outside the institution. On this same topic, Alex expressed "sometimes they (the Crocker) do really amazing things where I think they finally get it, and then they'll turn around and do something that causes me to say I don't know how you thought this was okay." She illustrated this point by comparing two exhibitions at the Crocker. The first exhibition featured contemporary Indigenous artists, traditional pottery, and a choral group affiliated with efforts to secure federal recognition for the Nisenan tribe. The show was, as she put it, a major production located in the main and secondary galleries. Alex offered that "the

Crocker did a great job giving the show a lot of context, it still had the white gaze art thing going on but a bunch of Indigenous artists were there, and I talked to all of them, and they thought it was a step in the right direction.” In contrast, the Black Artists on Art show was housed in a basement hallway (the former servants quarters of the Crocker’s home) away from the main galleries. Neither the show nor the artist’s talk were publicized on the museum’s social media channels. When asked to comment on why she thinks this is, Alex said “because Americans are constitutionally anti-Black, they can’t help themselves and they can’t recognize it.” Alex also mentioned that Black artists don’t have the same access to fine art museums because they’ve never been considered fine artists. She believes that in our efforts to prioritize inclusion and to do better, we’re still saying that artists have to go through formalized systems (formal art training, art history education, etc.). This is a problem, she argues, because these are still colonized systems and Black artists are often self-taught, and there hasn’t been a lot of work on the curatorial side to deconstruct these notions.

On the other hand, Alex very much supported the Crocker Museum’s efforts in regards to the Block by Block program. She expressed positive views about the program’s effectiveness in reaching communities typically underserved by the museum. In contrast, Rose and Leo both perceived Block by Block as ineffective. “With Block by Block, the Crocker parachutes into a poor neighborhood, does something briefly and then they’re gone. That’s the Crocker being able to say we went into these particular zip codes and did something, but a one day block party is not transformative change.”

In a more general criticism of the museum’s programming, Leo shared: “There are few things that get under my skin than needlessly wasted potential. You would think with the not too far off majority POC composition of Sacramento, the Crocker would be on the leading edge of



exciting programming. They have so many resources to draw from. If you're in Des Moines, you don't have a thriving Hmong population to tap into and bring into your institution like we do. They're leaving so much on the table just because they're not comfortable enough to do it." This sentiment echoes common criticisms about the rigidity of art museums and their unwillingness to break from established norms.

### *The History of the Crocker*

Because of time constraints, I was only able to speak with one arts leader about the museum's colonial history and how/if this history should be addressed (publicly, curatorially, etc.) more thoroughly in the present. Leo had this to say: "Acknowledging that the Crocker was created for a rich, white, racist family...what does that even accomplish? But at the same time, if that isn't even on the table, then what more transformative acknowledgements and course corrections are even feasible or even envisionable? Without the initial step of reckoning and acknowledgment, how do you move forward? Unless we can all agree on what's true, how can we come together on future priorities? Cosmetic changes are fine if you're not acknowledging the deeper issues at the root of it." Leo's perspective speaks to the broader assertion that as demands for social change in museums continue to evolve, understanding links to colonialism becomes more imperative because of the enduring manifestations of this history. Typically, however, museum professionals lack educational grounding and training in how to identify or address such manifestations (Morgan, 2023).

### *Institutional Change*

In interviews with arts leaders, I discussed institutional change both in a general sense and in regards to the Crocker. Alex expressed that "it's a shame that when you talk about institutional change, everything hinges on leadership or really invested individuals instead of

being institutionally structured that way.” Leo argued that “unfortunately in this capitalist society, what you spend money on represents your priorities. If you want to really understand the changes an institution is committed to, then ask where is the funding going? Is it being used to fund a bunch of new, well-paid positions that speak to how to reach different communities, are they hiring curators/top level staff whose backgrounds reflect this commitment, are they replacing their board with younger people or people who have some relevant grounding in these issues? If you don’t find those things then everything else is a rounding error on their budget, and when rubber meets the road, they can just keep on Crocker Ball(in) and everything else is for show.” Rose discussed a number of positive institutional changes that she’s witnessed over the past few years at the Crocker. For instance, she mentioned that the museum has made more acquisitions of BIPOC artists in the last 5 years than she’s ever seen. For a cultural institution, she argues, this is pretty remarkable. On the flip side, she argues that because the Crocker is less high profile than other arts institutions, there is less exposure to the kind of concessions the museum is making in the name of keeping doors open.

#### *Addressing Public Criticisms/ Social Media*

The Crocker Museum has not been immune to public criticism, especially on social media during widespread protests for racial justice in 2020. Rose, in particular, had a lot to say about this. She iterated how social media leaves no space for nuance and suggested that the Crocker at times has fallen victim to misrepresentation and false narratives. Early on in the conversation, Rose emphasized that “because I recognize how tremendously hard this work is, I want to push people to be better, but I also don’t want to be part of a false narrative that demonizes people over something that isn’t accurate.” She insisted that it’s harder for people to get excited about nuance than it is to say “this person is trash” or “this whole place is rotten to

the core.” She also expressed that because the Crocker is something that the city has massively invested in and will not let fail, we should be demanding that the museum be responsive to the community it serves and figuring out where there are opportunities for growth rather than harassing the Crocker and trying to drive it off of social media.

On another note, Rose argued that the Crocker has been responsive to criticisms but not always in the ways that count. For instance, “are they considering who is getting solo shows in the big gallery? Are they recognizing the misogyny in the artists that they’re giving huge platforms to like Mel Ramos?” Mel Ramos, a 20th century Pop art pioneer, has been criticized for having built a career off of what some would argue are sexist depictions of women. Ultimately, Rose believed that because there are so few visual arts spaces in Sacramento, she would like things at the Crocker to improve, not be destroyed or burned down.

Leo, on the other hand, argued that some of the bigger institutions (the Getty, MOMA, etc.) are a lot more responsive to these conversations because there’s a lot at stake if they don’t, whereas the Crocker can get away with things because it’s the only game in town. Regarding institutional change, Leo shared the perspective that the Crocker is an extremely overhead heavy institution that is wildly expensive to maintain and can only be supported by wealthy people who view it as a pet project and are not invested in changing it. “You change the environment around museums, in particular the public dialogue around race and equity, and in return you get cosmetic changes that don’t satisfy anyone and sort of irk the people who are most invested in the museum to begin with.” These criticisms reflect arts activists’ concerns that museums are engaging in diversity washing, meaning they utilize marketing strategies that give the impression of promoting change without implementing a comprehensive approach that produces tangible real-world effects.

## *The Future*

All three arts leaders contributed very insightful reflections on what they imagine will happen in the future or what they hope to see from the Crocker Museum when it comes to working towards a more just institution. Alex argued that if the Crocker is really serious about equity – they’re going to have to undertake a significant initiative that will take many years and involve local arts leaders, outside experts, and community members. She added, “not to say that they should definitely come to me, but no one has come to me to ask if I want to be involved in an effort like that, or what an effort like that could look like, and who else I’d recommend to be involved.” She ended on a hopeful note expressing that visual art itself is an immensely powerful medium, and the arts are great spaces to be having these conversations. Art allows us, she said, to confront things without being confrontational, to understand each other's stories, and to be less afraid of ‘the other.’

In terms of the future of the Crocker, Leo imagined that cultural shifts are going to “kill or transform the Crocker more than anything else.” These cultural shifts would, in his mind, stem from ongoing waves of transplants from the Bay Area and elsewhere that will demand more representative and cutting edge programming. He also added the idea that “sometimes you just need to build the better thing outside of the institution and lead people towards that, and out of their own self-preservation, these institutions will have to change.”

Rose’s thoughts on the current iteration of the Crocker can be explained by this quote: “As critical of the Crocker as I can be, in terms of thinking that they’re not serving a role in the regional arts community that they could, I’m not always convinced that it’s deserving of the vitriol that is launched at it.” In the long term, she senses there will be a seismic shift at the museum as the CEO (who has been there since the early 2000s) has expressed plans to retire. A

shake up of staff and increased demands for data driven equity evaluation, she argues, will ultimately contribute to widespread shifts at the museum.

Interviews with community arts leaders demonstrate that the Crocker Museum holds enormous power in the arts ecosystem in Sacramento. Facing little competition and being owned by the city, the Crocker has had little incentive to radically change or operate outside of its comfort zone. The data suggests that the Crocker has made meaningful strides in its programmatic efforts, but there are a number of opportunities to make sweeping institution-wide changes that would enable the museum to better live up to its mission statement and combat the pervasive whiteness of the museum.

#### **4.2 Crocker Employees Interviews**

In all three employee interviews, participants discussed the inherent trickiness of speaking on this topic as both a representative of an institution and an individual museum professional. Because of this and the fact that I interviewed all participants during working hours at the museum, employees exercised some amount of restraint in sharing personal perspectives. Despite this limitation, all three interviewees shared worthwhile insights on the Crocker's approach to equity and how the museum is contending with demands to better serve its surrounding community. Considering the perspectives that the interviewees shared are less personal, the data has been aggregated and presented as a whole.

#### *Operational Principles*

While discussing the Crocker's approach to equity with employees, a number of themes emerged concerning how the museum conceptualizes both the current work and the work required of the museum in the future.

1. The museum must ask more questions, make fewer statements.
2. How do we get the museum outside of these walls? How do we bring it to people instead of expecting them to come to us? (Art Ark, Block by Block, etc.)
3. The Crocker Museum seeks to represent the story of California, which is a multi-faceted and rich story to tell made up of many communities and histories.
4. The museum strives to create programs that are diverse not only in terms of subject matter, but in terms of panelists, format, etc.
5. The museum is a contested space, but it is also a space in which people come together to reflect, discuss, learn, and participate in difficult conversations.
6. What can we learn from our audiences instead of what can we pass onto our audiences?
7. The Crocker strives to create education driven by community partnerships (Sol Collective, Sacramento State, Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, etc.).
8. The museum is consistently asking how do we get people from all parts of Sacramento here given that museums are historically elite spaces? How does the Crocker burst that bubble?

### *Struggles in Advancing Institutional Change*

When questioned about barriers to change, employees offered a number of thoughts. For instance, museums move slowly, exhibitions are planned out years in advance, and the logistics of securing traveling exhibitions are extremely challenging. The employees also emphasized the need to appeal to a wide audience in order to remain financially viable. Another commonly shared thought: “None of us on this staff are experts on racism or trained on institutional DEI practice, so how do we all get on the same page given the diversity of backgrounds and lived experiences? How do we get everyone on the same page about what change is or about what

progress looks like? How do we even find shared vocabulary for what we're talking about?"

When asked about the possibility of external help, one employee expressed wariness towards "dubious DEI experts" now that equity has just become another profit hungry industry.

Another issue that employees named is that the Crocker can say they want to hire a diverse cohort in education and curation, but the reality is that art history degrees are prohibitively expensive and salaries for these positions are extremely low. The people who are able to surmount these barriers are typically well resourced and white. Finally, all employees shared openly about their struggles with situating themselves within a cultural institution and trying to balance the goals of the museum with their own goals or perspectives. One employee questioned, "should I be more vocal? When should I push back, and when should I accept the limits?" Overall, employees emphasized the challenging nature of working to change an institution, but all expressed faith that the Crocker has made significant strides and is critically engaging with equity in every aspect of the museum. To illustrate this point, an employee mentioned that each department within the museum has created an actionable item list that directly addresses equity. These agendas have not been made available to the public, but they include considerations regarding accessibility, representation, cultural competency, community input, etc.

### *Addressing Colonial Legacies*

When asked if the Crocker considers itself to be a "decolonizing" institution, an employee explained that the museum does not publicly use that language, but they do view their work as decolonial. To illustrate this point, they mentioned that the museum shows work that might typically and wrongfully be placed in an anthropology museum or used as ethnography.

"We don't relegate non-European art to some alternative space." The Crocker, they argued,

works very hard to create culturally relevant labels, acquire a diverse set of contemporary artists, and write historically excluded artists into the canon.

In regards to addressing the colonial origins of the museum itself, employees shared that there has been internal discussion on how to address the relationship between colonialism and the Crocker's wealth and the founding of the museum, but so far nothing has materialized and the question of how to do this publicly remains. An employee mentioned that when displaying gold-rush era prints of Sacramento, curators created label text and curriculum to contextualize the images and address the troublesome nature of the railroad. "It's better to tie this topic to distinct visual materials such as prints, rather than say 'this whole house is built on exploitation.'" This statement reflects, in my view, the museum's hesitancy to directly address the institution's relationship to the colonization of California and the removal of Indigenous peoples from their land. How can the museum view its work as decolonial if they're unwilling to even discuss the museum's relationship to Indigenous land theft and genocide?

Yang and Tuck, in their seminal piece, *Decolonization is not a metaphor* (2012), argue that decolonization is not a metaphor for improvements we want to make in our society or institutions. Decolonization requires the rematriation of Indigenous land and lifeways, it is not a synonym for social justice (Yang & Tuck, 2012). In this sense, the work of the Crocker Museum cannot be considered decolonial because the museum is not advancing the sovereignty of Native tribes and nations.



## CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Recommendations

Through interviews with employees from the Crocker Museum and arts leaders in the Sacramento community, I have developed a handful of core recommendations for the museum moving forward. I'm aware there are a number of complications and challenges associated with these recommendations, and thus are not intended to be prescriptive. Instead, these guidelines are intended to be a launching pad for envisioning new ways to create space for culture, education, and a healthier community.

- 1. Using principles of Community-Based Planning, the Crocker should develop a long-term and institution-wide initiative to better serve diverse communities both within and outside the walls of the museum.**

According to the *Community Planning Handbook* (2000), community-based planning is planning carried out with the active participation of the end users. Using this framework, institutions and community members are able to share knowledge and resources to address the issues and concerns of the community. Some of the key tenets of community-based planning relevant to institutional change are (1) identification and engagement of stakeholders, (2) investment in coalition building and maintenance, (3) analysis of and sharing relevant data, and (4) building consensus on program priorities.

In regards to a broadscale justice initiative at the Crocker Museum, using community-based program planning could look like creating a council made up of local arts leaders and activists, artists, community members, BIPOC scholars, and museum staff dedicated to co-creating an institutional plan. Ideally, it would be a very dialogic process and the

community would be involved at every stage including implementation. Community members would be compensated by the museum for their time and labor. A similar effort that could be used for guidance is the Anti-Racism Design Teams (ADT) created in 2020 by employees of the Oakland Museum of California to facilitate broadscale changes in organizational practice. According to the American Alliance of Museums, fifty staff members from various levels of the Oakland Museum worked together intensively over a three month period to assess equity in programming, working processes, and community engagement. Six high-level priorities emerged that were supported by 160 recommendations for both short-term and long-term strategies and actions. These priorities were presented to the entire staff, executive leadership, and to the Board of Trustees (AAM, 2022). A few notable outcomes of the ADT are as follows:

- Nominating eight new board members, bringing total board composition to 50 percent BIPOC representation
- A staff-led investment task force created to identify themes for OMCA's investment portfolio, working in collaboration with a board task force and Board Investment Committee
- A nine-dollar-an-hour pay increase for OMCA's lowest-paid employees, taking the base level of pay to \$26.26 per hour

I suggest that the Crocker Museum add to this model by incorporating community members into the overall process of designing and implementing a long-term initiative. Engaging community members should be viewed as an ongoing activity beginning at the program design stage and continuing throughout implementation and evaluation.

- 2. Allocate resources towards new positions dedicated to reaching diverse audiences that are filled by individuals who possess relevant training or experience.**

As one of the employees mentioned, most of the staff have training in art history, curatorial practice, or museum education. While museum education focuses on how to think critically about audience and accessibility, it doesn't necessarily provide a theoretical grounding in systemic racism or institutional change. Creating positions that are designed to hold the museum accountable and foster structural change could facilitate transformation from the inside. The Crocker could look to other museums that have created similar roles such as a curator of community dialogue at the Milwaukee Art Museum, director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the Seattle Art Museum, and senior director of belonging and inclusion at the Museum of Fine Art in Boston (Solomon, 2021).

### **3. Shake up the Board of Directors / Consider Alternative Leadership Structure.**

Diverse leadership should be a top priority for the Crocker Museum. Without representative leadership, it becomes very difficult to enact new agendas or transform institutional culture. Given that the board of directors at a museum is responsible for overseeing the direction of the institution, the board should reflect the community the museum intends to serve. The current makeup of the board skews older and is majority white. The museum should hire new board members who are young, from diverse backgrounds, and committed to organizational redesign. Additionally, the Crocker Museum could revise board roles and responsibilities to include individual and collective commitments to social justice principles. Finally, the museum could abandon use of a hierarchical leadership structure altogether, in favor of a flatter, more collaborative model. A small number of museums are already experimenting with this kind of thing, for example, the Five Oaks Museum recently appointed multiple people to a directorial role.

#### **4. Address the museum's relationship to the colonization of the West and enact reparations for California Tribal Nations**

As one of the interview participants mentioned, publicly addressing the Crockers' active role in settler colonialism is a crucial step in creating an honest, trustworthy, and transparent institution. Without this reckoning, it is hard to genuinely move forward with truly transformative measures. If the museum wants to practice true decoloniality, the Crocker should also work towards restoration of land for Native communities given that E.B. Crocker was responsible for lobbying Congress to grant the Central Pacific Railroad company millions of acres of land that belonged to Indigenous nations. Reparations could also include raising funding for Tribes that were displaced and decimated during the construction of the railroad. The Nisenan Tribe, whose ancestral homelands were used as the foundation for the construction of the Crocker Museum, is currently engaged in efforts to have their federal recognition restored as it was rescinded in the late 1950s on account of the California Rancheria Termination Act. The Crocker Museum could act as an institutional partner in these efforts by helping to secure funding, providing resources, and generating support for the UBA SEO: Nisenan Arts and Culture gallery in Nevada City. Additional funding could go to the Chinese Railroad Workers Memorial Project which commemorates the Chinese laborers' contributions and mourns the lives lost during the railroad era. The Crocker could also create an exhibition that tells the truth about the history of the museum and inspires dialogue about this period of California history.

#### **5.2 Discussion**

When I initially conceived of this project, I was thinking a lot about various theories for social change. I was engaged in the mental gymnastics of weighing one theory against another because I wanted to feel grounded in my beliefs about how to change the world. Above all, I

wanted to find evidence that the world *can* change. I know that the world changes every day in metrics imaginable and not, but I wanted to know that the omnipotent systems of domination, the ones consistently recycled and rebranded in increasingly creative ways, can actually be dismantled. I wasn't so sure. I'm still not.

Most of our institutions were created to benefit the ruling class, even if established under the guise of solving collective problems. The institution of policing was established to squash slave uprisings, the institution of marriage was created to brandish women as property, cultural institutions like the British Museum were created to promulgate spoils of empire, and so on. These origin stories are still very much alive in the present, we're never too far off from where we came even if the eye isn't trained to see it that way. Technologies build and build on top of one another. We create new names. Invent new stories. But nothing is really from scratch.

*So how do we fundamentally change a museum? Can we?*

As I hope to have demonstrated in this thesis, decades of organizing and protest have forced museums to reckon with their institutional failings in unprecedented ways. Museums are responding in visible and frankly meaningful ways. Some museums are eliminating fees for EBT users, diversifying their staff, and finally giving platforms to BIPOC, women, and queer artists. Some are finding ways to reach new audiences. Not all museums are doing these things and not all museums are doing them effectively. As we all know, the message of change is radically different from the messy, ugly workings of structural change. Sometimes the message is all there is. Sometimes what looks like structural change is just a well-done department store makeover. Still, sometimes real change happens.

From conversations with brilliant museum workers and arts leaders in Sacramento, I've learned that there will always be a multitude of perspectives on how to change something, and

real change happens when we make space for all of those perspectives to be heard. Embedded in this thesis is a cacophony of voices. Some voices call on us to build the better thing outside of the museum, to allow it to fail because in its place will sprout something more culturally generative and imaginative. Others call on us to create healthy institutions, to work to make the museum better, to make the museum more trustworthy, to make the museum more responsible and nurturing to all kinds of communities. The conclusion of this thesis, if there is one, is that these ideas do not need to be mutually exclusive. Maybe some cultural institutions will not be able to change, maybe they'll need to die before they're able to be collectively useful. Others will find their way, I believe, through listening and meaningful, informed collaboration with communities. In terms of the Crocker Museum, I hope they listen to the voices presented here, and I hope they realize that there are a lot more out there demanding to be heard.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2022 (Excerpts)

Figure 6 Race and Ethnicity (Curators, Conservators, Educators and Leadership Only)

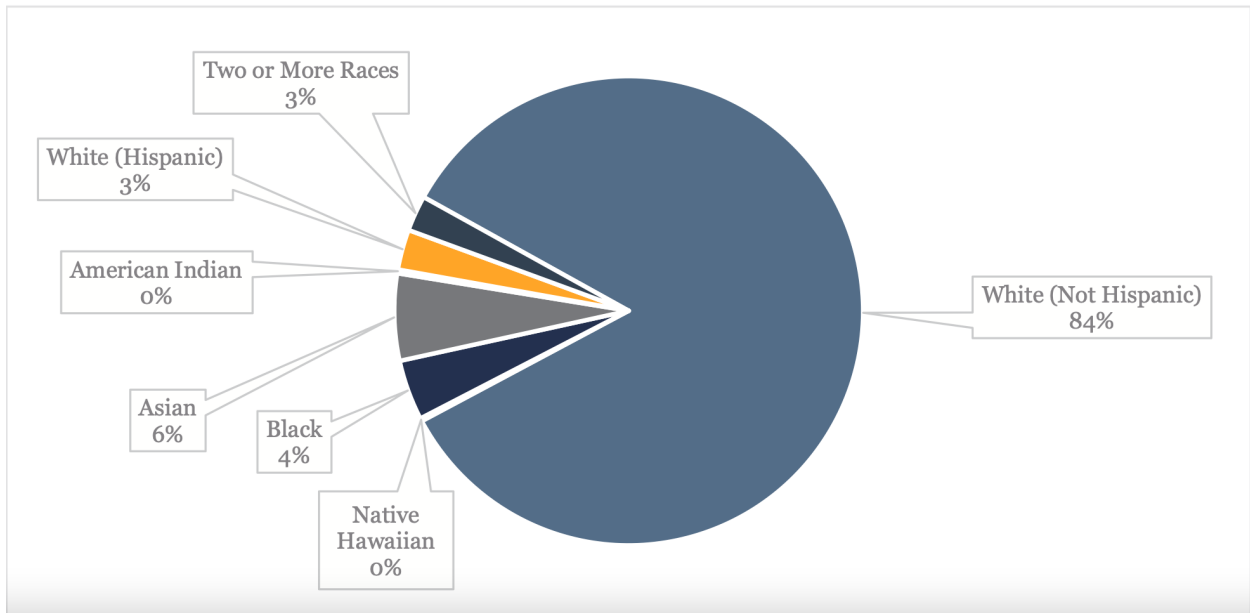


Figure 10: Intellectual Leadership Positions Since 2015, POC and White

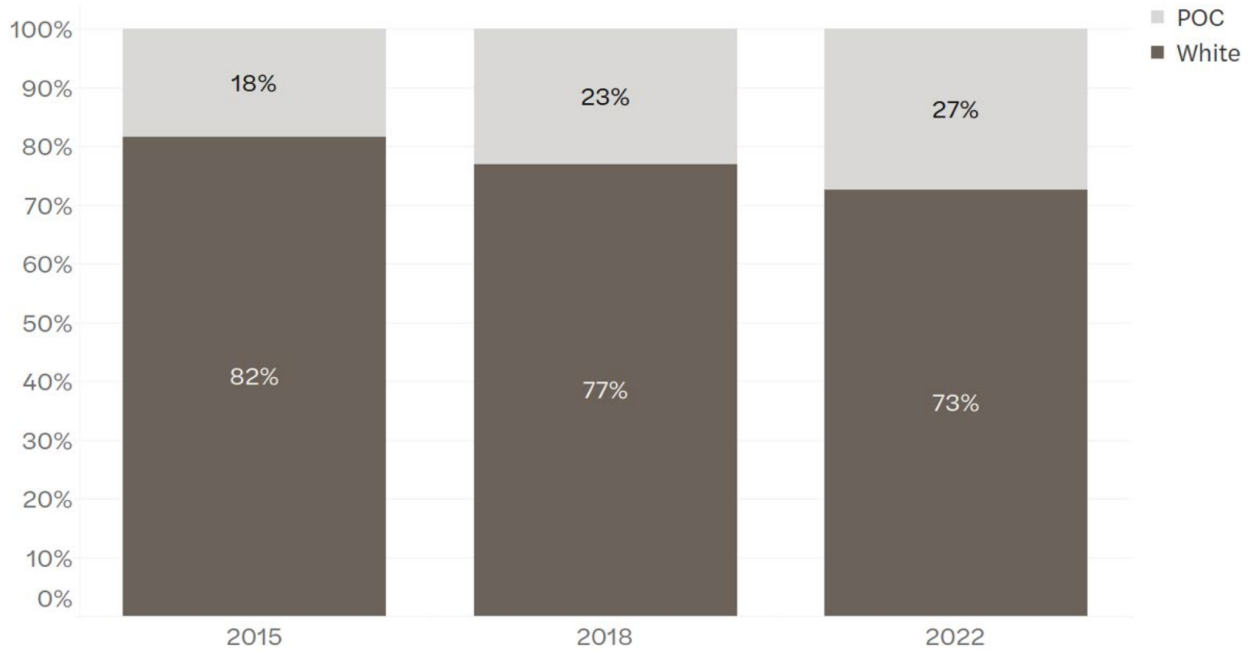


Figure 5: Museum Leadership Since 2015, Gender

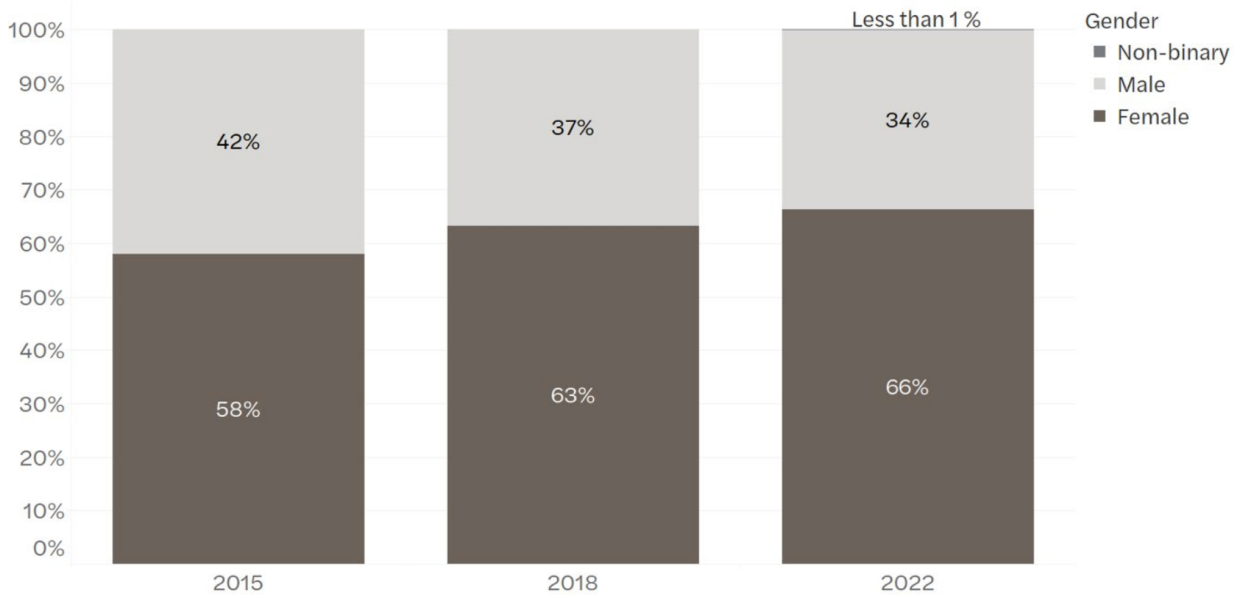
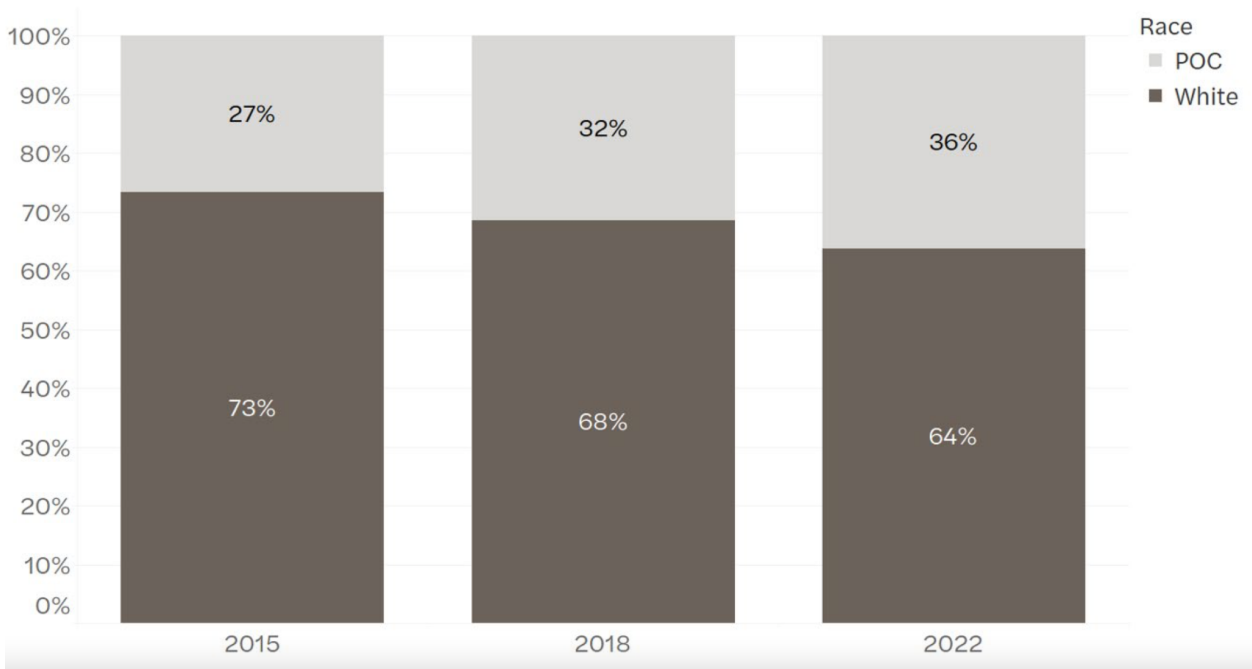




Figure 8: All Staff Since 2015, POC and White



**APPENDIX 2: Interviewees Information**

PSEUDONYM	Gender	Race	POSITION
Alex	F	African-American	Arts Leader/Activist
Leo	M	African-American	Arts Leader/ Activist
Rose	F	White	Arts Leader/ Activist
N/A	F	POC	Crocker Employee
N/A	F	White	Crocker Employee
N/A	M	White	Crocker Employee

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