

**Harlem on My Mind:  
A Problematic Step toward Increasing Cultural Diversity?**

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## Abstract

This study examines one museum's effort to draw attention to and advance the cultural standing of an underrepresented group of people in the United States. The exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, mounted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, featured the 70-year history of the Black community in Harlem. In the context of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the time, the exhibition was accused of being racist and sparked widespread protest. While the exhibition is widely revered as an early attempt to include a culturally and socially underrepresented group as the topic of a major museum exhibition, it brought to light a number of contentious issues with respect to the representation of minority groups, including not only African Americans but also Jewish, Irish, and Puerto Rican people. Through historical research, I analyze why the exhibition was controversial and what we can learn from this early effort to highlight a particular cultural group.

I argue that in spite of their good intentions, the organizers of the exhibition, perhaps unconsciously, viewed African Americans as inferior human beings, treating their culture and art not only as exotic, but as less valuable than those of European Americans. By ignoring the opinions of the Black community, the exhibition developers failed to adequately locate the museum within the larger web of society and community. Taking the position that museums consist of interrelated and interdependent relationships connected to the broader society, I show how the exhibition is relevant to today's museum practices and suggest more effective ways of promoting greater understanding of other cultures and their arts in museum settings.

### Introduction

On January 18, 1969, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) hosted a controversial exhibition titled *Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, featuring the history and culture of the Black community in Harlem, New York City. The exhibition created a buzz not only because of the sensitive topic itself but also because of the perspective from which it was presented. Although the Met was an art museum, *Harlem on My Mind* did not showcase the work of Harlem's artists. Rather, the exhibition used, for example, "blown-up photographs, jazz recordings, taped speeches and extensive wall texts that included reproductions of newspaper stories about Harlem" (Kimmelman, 1995, p. 2.1). I gather that the exhibition was more like an historical interpretation of the Harlem scenery using multi-media installation techniques. One viewer even put his impression of the exhibition in this way – "as if *Life* magazine had suddenly gone 3-D" (Glueck, 1969, p. 28). *Harlem on My Mind* mainly featured the time period from 1900 to 1968, telling stories of African Americans including the great migration, the Great Depression, World War II, and the human rights movements and riots of the 1960s. The exhibition ended with a gallery, "Hall of Heroes," full of figure photographs of eminent African-Americans (Kimmelman, 1995). \$225,000, most of the total cost, came from the Henry Luce Foundation, and \$25,000 for human labor expenses was contributed by the New York State Council (Glueck, 1969).

Criticism of *Harlem on My Mind* had started several months before the opening. Therefore, when the exhibition was first viewed by the public, it not only brought in many curious visitors but also sparked protests and a boycott against the Met and the show. About 75,000 people visited the museum to see the show in the first nine days after its opening, and hundreds of thousands more visitors viewed the show before it ended three month later on April

6 (Kimmelman, 1995). According to the museum's vice director, Joseph Noble, 9,467 people visited the exhibition during the first four hours after its opening, marking the highest record number in that amount of time (Johnson, 1969).

Before the official opening of *Harlem on My Mind*, the exhibition was opened for a press review and for the museum's trustees. On both occasions African Americans picketed outside of the museum in protest (Arnold, 1969a). Several hours before the opening, anonymous vandal(s) damaged 10 European paintings, including Rembrandt's *Christ with a Pilgrim's Staff*, by scratching 'H's on the paintings' surfaces (Arnold, 1969a). The museum staff and Thomas P. F. Hoving, the director of the Met, assumed that the 'H' might stand for 'Harlem' or 'Hoving,' but in either case, they concluded that the vandalism was definitely related to the show *Harlem on My Mind* (Arnold, 1969a). The damage was minimal and no one was arrested.

Hoving hired Allon Schoener, visual-arts director of the New York State Council on the Arts, to serve as curator for the show. Schoener was famous for his unprecedented use of multi-media, such as blown-up photographs, film projections, and amplified sounds. Schoener was selected by Hoving, an ambitious, young director, as a way to shake up the museum's flatness with a fresh, new exhibition.

### **Social Context**

Before further discussing *Harlem on My Mind*, it is important to review the social background of the 1960s. In U.S. history, the 1960s coincided with the Civil Rights Movement. The long-time segregation policies and unequal opportunities in employment, housing, and education sparked African Americans and their advocates to fight for the achievement of equal rights regardless of race. In 1964, the Harlem riot broke out in opposition to the city's unjust police power against African Americans. On July 16 of the same year, a fifteen-year-old African

American, James Powell, was shot to death by an off-duty policeman in Manhattan. Initially peaceful rallies and protests organized by the Congress of Racial Equality became violent when police tried to suppress them. Riots spread to different parts of the country, such as Rochester, NY, and several cities in New Jersey (Salzman, 1996). In addition, Malcolm X and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights activists, were assassinated in 1965 and 1968, respectively (Civil rights during the Johnson Administration). Right after Dr. King's assassination, there was another series of significant riots in 125 U.S. cities (Civil rights during the Johnson Administration). In spite of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed obstacles that prevented African Americans from voting, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination in the sale and rental of U.S. apartments and houses, a great deal of segregation still existed in U.S. society. Opening just after these events, *Harlem on My Mind* was held during a very sensitive moment for underrepresented ethnic groups, especially African Americans. Therefore, it is easy to understand how touching on these most sensitive issues of the period raised such attention and controversy.

### **Why Controversial?**

There are several reasons why the exhibition was contentious. First, Schoener, whose ethnic background was Jewish, was viewed by many as not having sufficient knowledge about the Black community and culture. Although Schoener included three African American assistants, Reginald McGhee, director of photographic research; Donald Harper, associate research and media director; and A'Lelia Nelson, community relations coordinator, for the show, African American protestors argued that the coordinator for the exhibition should have been an African American. Therefore, they called for the resignation of Schoener (Arnold, 1969a). In addition, it was argued that Schoener did not listen carefully to the Harlem advisors' complaints

about the exhibition prior to its opening (Kimmelman, 1995). Perhaps the most serious concern was the fact that even though *Harlem on My Mind* was held in an art museum, the exhibition failed to include any visual art works created by African American artists. While some African American artists such as Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis had requested that their work be shown, their requests were never granted (Kimmelman, 1995). According to Michael Kimmelman (1995), Schoener did not want to break the consistency of his show, composed of photographs, text, and sound. African American protestors understood the unjust irony that even though the exhibition was about African American culture, the Met did not allow paintings and sculptures from African American artists to be in the museum (Kimmelman, 1995). According to a New York Times article, Schoener was focused on avoiding traditional display techniques and trying to overcome the shortcomings of his previous exhibition, *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life* at the Jewish Museum by improving visual and audio mechanical devices (Arnold, 1969a). In the exhibition at the Jewish Museum, Schoener had used almost the same installation methodology as he did for the Met exhibition. For example, his approach to the *Lower East Side* was to make it like a documentary, using newspaper articles and many photographs without further explanation (Mudrick, 1972).

### **Biased Museum Catalogue**

The catalogue for *Harlem on My Mind* was at the center of the controversy. Schoener, who wanted to bring a fresh voice to the catalogue, chose to include the term paper of a high school student, Candice Van Ellison, as its introduction. In the summer of 1968, Schoener met Van Ellison, a student at the Theodore Roosevelt High Schools in the Bronx at the time, at an urban poverty program where she was working and he was supervising (Arnold, 1969a). Van Ellison suggested that Schoener take a look at a term paper she had written a year before to help

him develop the exhibition (Arnold, 1969a). Drawing inspiration from Van Ellison's paper, the introduction to the exhibition catalogue included the following controversial statements:

One other important factor worth noting is that, psychologically, Blacks may find anti-Jewish sentiments place them, for once, within a majority. Thus, our contempt for the Jew makes us feel more completely American in sharing a national prejudice. (Schoener, 1969, n.p.)

The publication of these sentiments resulted in protests and rage from the Jewish community which accused the catalogue and the museum of anti-Semitism. However, the sentences that Van Ellison had originally written were different from these controversial remarks and were actually based on a multi-ethnic sociological study, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer. In her original term paper, Van Ellison quoted the following material:

One other important factor worth noting is that psychologically Negroes may find that 'a bit of anti-Jewish feeling helps them feel more completely American, a part of the majority group.' (Moynihan and Glazer, 1963 quoted in Arnold, 1969c, p. 29)

According to an article in the New York Times, Schoener asked Van Ellison to remove the quotation marks and footnotes and to paraphrase the sentence in her own words which resulted in the more inflammatory version. In addition, Schoener also deleted the following from the paper:

Because many people don't believe that it is possible for an inhabitant of a community to relate objectively the facts concerning the community, a large part of the paper was based on the views, opinions, and facts presented by a number of different sociologists, economists, authors, and politicians. (Ellison quoted in Arnold, 1969c, p. 29)

Schoener even rejected Hoving's concern about the introduction being anti-Semitic, telling Hoving that the words did not imply anti-Semitic feelings (Arnold, 1969c). By deliberately deleting the quotation marks from Van Ellison's essay to make it appear less like a term paper and ignoring the opinions of others, Schoener evoked feelings of hatefulness against Jewish people and African Americans.

Hoving's preface for the catalogue also revealed bias with respect to the Harlem community. By describing his memories of a wealthy early childhood family with an African American maid and chauffeur, he dramatized the segregation between African Americans and Whites. Later he confessed that he had made up some of the childhood stories he had included in the catalogue (Kimmelman, 1995). In addition, his repetitive remarks that African Americans are humans make me wonder why he needed to emphasize the assertion so many times. The overemphasis of this fact seems to reveal a subconscious doubt about its truth. In one New York Times article, Thomas Brady (1969, p. 27) describes that when the exhibition was attacked by the public because of the anti-Semitic material of the catalogue, Hoving first replied that "If the truth hurts, then so be it." However, when city officials threatened to withdraw the catalogues and cut city funding of the museum, Hoving apologized to "all persons who have been offended" (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96). Hoving added that the purpose of the exhibition "was a sincere attempt to increase the knowledge and understanding of the cultural history of Harlem by the public" in his apology published on January 21, 1969 (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96). The publisher of the catalogue, Random House, also issued an apology over the controversy. Robert L. Bernstein, president and chief executive officer of Random House, said that "the publishing house is extremely sorry that the publication of the catalogue has, instead of helping to bring the minorities of this great city together, been a divisive force" (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96). He also promised that apologies from both the director of the museum and publisher would be added to a revised version of catalogue (Arnold, 1969b).

At first, both the museum and the publisher declined to stop distribution of the catalogues (Arnold, 1969b). However, when the controversy became more heated, Hoving decided to stop selling the \$1.95 soft-cover catalogues, of which over 16,000 copies had already been sold.

However, Random House refused to withdraw the hard-cover catalogues which were priced at \$12.95 (Arnold, 1969c).

### **Different Perspectives**

One of the people who especially criticized *Harlem on My Mind* was the mayor of New York City, John V. Lindsay. Mayor Lindsay accused the exhibition of racism specifically against Jewish, Irish, and Puerto Rican people (Arnold, 1969b). In her introduction to the catalogue, Van Ellison mentions that “it is amazing how quickly they [Irish] caught on to White America’s tradition of hatred for Blacks” (Schoener, 1969, n.p.). Van Ellison goes on to say that “If Blacks invariably find themselves bumping into Jews ahead of them, they just as invariably find themselves bumping into Puerto Ricans behind them” (Schoener, 1969, n.p.). The decision to add the high school student’s term paper, which had been written two years previously, was recklessly made by the director of the museum and the chief curator. They were not sufficiently aware of the deep sensitivities surrounding racial issues which had developed in the minds of underrepresented groups. Hoving later admitted his mistake:

This was an honest attention, but there was an error in judgment – for which I as director of the museum accept full and total responsibility – that has resulted in a controversy that has threatened to mar the entire project. (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96)

He also went on to acknowledge that “the introduction (of the catalogue) has deeply disturbed certain groups of people in this city” (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96).

Robert J. Mangum, Commissioner of the State Division of Human Rights, asked for *Harlem on My Mind* to be closed “until it reflects a more accurate record of the aspirations, achievements, and goals of the Black people of New York” (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96). Mangum also criticized the show as being negative about Harlem, presenting the poverty-ridden aspects of the town as opposed to its bright side. In addition, he pointed out that the exhibition lacked

representation of contemporary African American artists from the city and that the show presented “a White man’s view of Harlem” (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96).

Mario A. Proccacino, a trustee of the Met, was one of the people who protested against the exhibition’s catalogue. Proccacino expressed his feelings about the introduction of the catalogue in a letter to Hoving, telling him that he was shocked by “this most offensive and dangerous publication” and that it should be discontinued (Arnold, 1969b, p. 96). Most of the museum’s trustees were very supportive of the project from the beginning, but later expressed that it would have been better if the exhibition and the catalogue had placed less emphasis on segregation and racism. One board member, Francis T. P. Plimpton, dissented from the majority’s view, stating, “I would not try to do anything about the catalogue. There is such a thing as liberty of the press” (Arnold, 1969a, p. 1). He also disagreed that it was problematic to display non-art objects as part of the exhibition since the charter of the Met stresses the educational role of the museum (Arnold, 1969a).

While it seems that *Harlem on My Mind* received only criticism and a notorious reputation, Adam Clayton Powell, a Harlem minister, praised the exhibition pointing out that the museum program and photographs well presented a 68-year history of Harlem. He commented that the exhibition showed “where we came from” (Johnson, 1969, p. 22). Another African American who felt positive about the exhibition was Human Rights Commissioner, William H. Booth. He disagreed with the Black critics and expressed his opinion that he did not find any validity to the complaints about the show. Booth also commented that “I don’t agree that there are no signs of hope in this exhibition. I think there are both the good side and the seamy side of Harlem shown. I think it’s well rounded” (City rights commissioner, 1969, p. 4). In addition,

Booth rejected the claim that the catalogue was racist, arguing that Van Ellison was “a product of her society” and “race hatred” existed in the country (City rights commissioner, 1969, p. 4).

### **Harlem on Whose Mind?**

*Harlem on My Mind* was accused of being full of distortions and misrepresentations and of overlooking the rich political, institutional, and cultural development of Harlem (Handler, 1969). The exhibition could not escape criticism that it was presented from the two White men’s points of view. Both key players of the exhibition, Hoving and Schoener, were well-educated White males from upper-middle class economic backgrounds. So, for them, although Harlem was geographically a close neighbor of the Met (only about 30 blocks away), culturally, it would have been a very remote place.

While the organizers might have had the sincere intention of making a progressive and astonishing attempt to showcase a socially underrepresented group of people, *Harlem on My Mind* was interpreted by most as an insult to African Americans and other underrepresented groups. In fact, it raised more questions about the perspective and openness of the Met, long considered a “White” museum. In the catalogue reissued in 1995 by the New Press, Schoener revealed that

I honestly believed that I could identify with the American Black culture I was depicting. For a very short period in my life, I believed that I could see things from a Black perspective and believed that I was tuned in to values that were important to Blacks. (Kimmelman, 1995, p. 2.1)

Schoener’s focus on the form of exhibition of *Harlem on My Mind* made him blind to critical issues regarding the content. In his desire to impress visitors with cutting-edge technologies, huge blown-up photos, and simultaneously played sounds, he unfortunately ended up disturbing many of them. In addition, according to an article in *Art International*, some of the interview videos in the show were hardly audible (Mellow, 1969). As a museum person who has

been involved in mounting a number of exhibitions, I realize that it is extremely difficult for curators to develop the content of an exhibition as freely as they want because of limitations they confront, such as insufficient funding, limited exhibition space and technology, and the mission of the institution. Therefore, the challenge is how to strike a balance without sacrificing either the content or effective methodology of presentation, display, and installation.

Museum journals published from 1968 to 1972 rarely deal with multi-media technologies. Rather, they suggest how to hang different types of paintings and to install vitrines. However, I did find one article about how to use new audio-visual equipment and techniques in order to intensify and stimulate visitors' emotional responses and to provide more in-depth understanding of exhibition content (Chedister, 1972). In this article, Chedister (1972) argues that "diffusion of knowledge," which is the mission of the Smithsonian Institution and many other museums, can be expanded through the use of audio-visual techniques in museum exhibitions. I assume that multi-media technology was uncommon and perhaps improperly used in museum exhibitions of the 1960s. As I mentioned earlier, in his Jewish Museum exhibition, Schoener did not interpret or give sufficient guidance information for visitors. In my view, he overdid the presentation side by emphasizing visual and audio technologies over content. He seems to have focused on the overwhelming power of the new technology at the expense of dedicating careful thought to how to present the sensitive topics without being offensive.

In Hoving's writing on the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (1969), I could not help notice his comment on the exhibition's interpretation. He argues that "It ["Harlem on My Mind"] doesn't interpret or explain. It sticks to the facts, Harlem's historical events over the past sixty-eight years, its literature, theater, politics, music, art, and business" (Hoving, 1969, p. 243). The exhibition's catalogue published in 1969 shows that the show was heavily based on newspaper

articles and clippings. What Hoving fails to realize is that, while newspaper articles, blown-up photographs, and interviews can include facts, the process of selecting what to include in the show is necessarily subjective. I believe that the chief curator and his staff chose certain images, interview recordings, and newspaper articles to be included in the exhibition which means that they shaped the exhibition to be viewed in a certain way, intentionally or unintentionally. Museum exhibitions highly depend on interpretation, and the perspective of the interpretation is strongly influenced by who is mounting the exhibitions.

Another comment made by Hoving in the *Bulletin* stimulated me to think about the eligibility of *Harlem on My Mind* in terms of the museum's mission. Hoving articulates that the exhibition has "nothing to do with art in the narrow sense" (Hoving, 1969, p. 243). Then, why did he decide to mount the exhibition at the Met? He points out that the museum charter indicates that the museum should "apply itself vigorously not only to the study of the fine arts but to relate them to practical life as well" (Hoving, 1969, p. 243). He goes on to say that practical life can mean "involvement, an active and thoughtful participation in the events of our time" (Hoving, 1969, p. 243). Here is the contradiction in his argument. According to the charter of the Met, the study of fine arts should be related to practical life. However, Hoving neglected the importance of including Black art by focusing exclusively on practical life to justify his practices in relation to the exhibition. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the exhibition did even encourage involvement and active, thoughtful participation in the events of the time.

In hindsight it is clear that in order to satisfy the museum's mission and fully explore the culture of Harlem, the exhibition should have included art works from local African American artists. James Van DerZee, a well known photographer at the time, was one of the principle contributors to the exhibition whose work was mainly devoted to studies of African American

life (Beautiful people, 1970). In 1967, McGhee, media director of the exhibition and a photographer, found Van DerZee's 50,000 well-kept negatives in his Harlem studio while McGhee was conducting research for the exhibition (Beautiful people, 1970). While Van DerZee is identified as an artist in an *Ebony* article from the time, the photographs that appeared in the exhibition were intended to function as factual, historical images depicting the stories of Harlem (Beautiful people, 1970). Although photography is widely accepted as an art form now, it would not have been viewed as such by most people in the late 1960s.

*Harlem on My Mind* barely touched on the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, a rich cultural, artistic, and intellectual movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Including this critical period of Black cultural activity would have made the exhibition richer and more culturally inclusive. Rather, the exhibition focused heavily on issues, riots, and social movements related to the long history of segregation and racism in the community. For example, newspaper headlines from the catalogue included "Race Riot: Set Upon and Beat Negroes," "Result from Race Prejudice," and "Scattered Violence Occurs in Harlem and Brooklyn."

### **What Went Wrong and What Can We Learn from the Event?**

In this section, I analyze the event and explain what caused the museum and exhibition to be considered racist and insensitive. Even though the factors are presented discretely, I find that all the factors are interconnected and cannot be thought of as separate, disconnected causes.

#### **Intended Controversies?**

After researching and learning more about *Harlem on My Mind*, I cannot help but think that Hoving and Schoener may have intentionally manipulated the exhibition. As a Jewish person, Schoener must have been aware of the tension between the African American and Jewish communities at the time. Then, why did he neglect the controversial text included in the

catalogue? Did he create the controversy by design in order to attract more visitors or draw more attention to his own work? I also question the decision to include a high school student's term paper as the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. Although Van Ellison's voice would have been fresh, was it appropriate, in terms of credibility, to use her text? Perhaps Hoving and Schoener were aware of the vulnerability of the source and may have used an innocent girl as a tool to lessen or redirect the predicted controversy.

### **Imposed Cultural Superiority**

As demonstrated in the decision not to include any art work from African American artists in *Harlem on My Mind*, the decision-makers apparently considered Black art less valuable or even not a part of the fine arts. Perhaps this is why they did not include the rich, cultural, and artistic movement of Harlem Renaissance in the exhibition. According to Paul DiMaggio (1991), the notion of *high* culture was created by rich upper-class people in the late 1800s to preserve and separate their culture from *low* popular culture. This attitude of valuing and separating high culture would have looked down on Black culture and arts and even prevented African American artists from showing their work at the conservative art museum. When people charged with making critical decisions in museum exhibitions do not value minority cultures, chances are slim that those cultures will be presented fairly and respectfully.

### **Single Authoritative Voice**

The single authoritative voice presented by the museum was the major reason that the exhibition, which was intended to facilitate cultural diversity, was criticized as exclusive and even racist. As I mentioned above, the content of exhibitions is mainly decided by museum staff members. In order to avoid making the same mistake that Hoving and Schoener did, museum professionals must be aware of the sensitivities surrounding cultural diversity. In this case, the

major facilitators did not have sufficient background or prior knowledge to understand the African American community profoundly. They should have listened to the concerned voices of Harlem advisors and patrons before opening the exhibition. I do not intend to imply that only members of majority groups can fall prey to these problems. However, museum professionals should learn to consider using multiple voices to tell a story, especially one dealing with controversial issues. In doing so, museum exhibitions will expose audiences to various legitimate angles on the issues and welcome their various responses as opposed to imposing or expecting any single dominant stance.

### **Rigid Museum Structure and Insufficient Collaboration**

In relation to factors presented above, the museum's rigid and bureaucratic organizational structure could have influenced the misinterpretation of Black culture. As illustrated earlier, Hoving and Schoener acted as the major decision-makers, allowing little communicative, collaborative work in the processes of exhibition development. They ignored the voices of other people concerning the problematic aspects of the exhibition which could have prevented the massive criticism of the museum and spared the feelings of cultural minority groups. Although they hired three African American staff members for the show, they acted only as assistants for developing the exhibition. No evidence was found that they were part of major decision-making or that their opinions were reflected in either the content of the exhibition or the catalogue even though the theme of the exhibition was their culture and art. While I am not questioning the division of roles, such as director, curator, and educator, political power should not be abused. For example, Hoving and Schoener should have consulted with the Black community to include perspectives that they could not have sufficiently understood. This masculine model of business management, which undervalues collaboration and allows authoritative decision-making without

consultation with others, still exists in many art museums today (S. Young, personal communication, September 25, 2009).

Working as a diverse team is one way to ensure that the voices of people from different social, economic, cultural, and educational background are heard. According to Sarah Young (2009), a museum educator of a university museum on the East Coast of the U.S., while many museums have separate departments within one organization, such as educational, curatorial, and collections, some have adopted a collaborative exhibition team approach. For example, the Brooklyn Museum of Art in NYC created one exhibition team which included almost all staff members, including the director, curators, educators, exhibition designers, and installers. This team, drawing on many different, diverse angles and opinions, has successfully enhanced museum exhibitions and educational programs (Young, 2009).

### **Lack of Understanding of Interconnectedness of the Museum and its Community**

Related to all the causes of *Harlem on My Mind* being controversial and racist, the major players were myopic, focusing too much attention on attracting a large number of visitors to the museum. If they had better understood the interconnection of the museum with its community, they would have been mindful of creating something that unified instead of divided its members. Museums are made of relationships, patterns, and networks of people, departments, objects, programs, and visitors which exist as part of the larger social, educational web. As the *Harlem on My Mind* case shows, museums' educational and social practices affect their relationships with the local and broader community. This museum's catalogue brought out undesirable feelings that people are divided based on their culture and race and that some cultures and races are superior to others. Some people (or a person) even broke into the museum and damaged part of the museum's permanent collection. However, when this connection is understood, museums

can act as agents of greater cultural diversity and social inclusion (Sandell, 1998). Richard Sandell (1998, p. 410) argues that “access to, and participation in, cultural activity can increase an individual’s confidence, self-esteem and self-determination, enabling them to re-establish social relationships.”

### **Recent Museum Practices Focusing on Underrepresented Cultures**

Unfortunately, stereotypes and misinterpretation of African Americans still exist in more recent museum practice. In 1994, for example, the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted an exhibition titled *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. While some praised the exhibition for being provocative and critical, many others felt that it was negative and degrading to African Americans (Richardson, 1994). Even though the chief curator, Thelma Golden, was an African American herself, the exhibition did not overcome the stereotypical portraits of Black people as criminals and athletes (Kimmelman, 1995). In spite of Golden’s intention to criticize the “media fascination around black masculinity [as] always concentrated in three areas: sex, crime and sports” (Kimmelman, 1995, p. 2.1), many art pieces at the show unfortunately emphasized those very stereotypes. For example, artist Dawn Dedeaux’s real-size photograph of a young black man holding a gun and wearing a holster falls squarely into the stereotype of the Black man as a violent criminal. While Golden may have intended to emphasize her critical stance about Black stereotypes by using a paradoxical approach to present the exhibition, her approach was not effective enough to convince visitors.

### **Museums’ Role as Social Agents**

How far have U.S. mainstream museums advanced from this early attempt to highlight underrepresented groups of people? It has been almost 20 years since the American Association of Museums published *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*

(1992), a landmark document focused on museums' role as educational institutions and agents for cultural diversity and social inclusion. According to the report, museums are firmly located in society as part of the educational infrastructure, focusing on enriching visitors' experiences and their relationship with the community (American Association of Museums, 1992). According to Hooper-Greenhill (1992), many museums are trying to include diverse perspectives from underrepresented groups of people. In addition, many museum conferences have recently raised such issues as cultural diversity and social inclusion in their meeting themes. For example, in March, 2010, *From the Margins to the Core?*, a museum conference focused on diversity and equity, was held in London, United Kingdom, organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies. Another museum conference, *the International Conference on the Inclusive Museum*, has been organized every year since 2008 to encourage academic and practical research to improve museum practices in a democratic, communicative, and inviting manner.

Many museums have successfully realized their role as social agents. For example, the Migration Museum in Adelaide, Australia, provides a community access gallery called *The Forum* to balance the voice of the museum by contributions from community members themselves (Szekeres, 2002). In this gallery, community groups present their own displays, stories, and experiences (Szekeres, 2002). According to Viv Szekeres (2002), museum staff members, including curators, designers, educators, reception staff, operation management, and a program coordinator, assist the groups in presenting their stories. The Stockholm City Museum in Sweden launched an inclusive educational program called *Stockholm Education*, targeting city street workers, such as police officers, bus drivers, street cleaners, and traffic wardens, who were not frequent visitors to the Stockholm City Museum (Friman, 2006). In addition, since 1998,

*Cultural Connections*, the collective endeavor of many Chicago museums, has provided cross-cultural exhibitions and programs to diverse cultural groups in order to foster the value of cultural differences and understanding (Cabrera, 2006).

### **Improve Relevant Connections between Museums and Audiences**

Even though *Harlem on My Mind* acted as a negative force to divide several communities in NYC, it did reveal a lesson which is important in bringing more underrepresented groups of people into museums. Officials of the Met estimated that the museum had six or seven times more Black visitors than that of any other exhibition before (Big crowds force museum, 1969). *Black Male* also attracted a large number of African American visitors who were not only curious about the exhibition but also seeking something relevant to them (Richardson, 1994). My personal experiences as a museum-goer demonstrate that cultural relevance matters. For instance, when I visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. in 2008, I had the chance to explore the exhibition *Recognize! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture*, which featured figurative paintings, photographs, graffiti, films, and poems related to hip hop culture and music. It was clear that in comparison to other museums I had visited that day, the exhibition had attracted significantly more African American visitors.

*Harlem on My Mind* was a problematic step that could have been evaluated as a sincere effort towards achieving better representation of and engagement with members of diverse cultures in mainstream museums in the U.S. If the main players had understood that all cultures and arts are valuable and that museums can act as social agents to interconnect and establish positive social relationships among community members, the Black community in Harlem could have felt important and celebrated and it could have healed still tender race wounds and affected the community's sense of inclusion in the museum and as part of greater NYC and American

community. Today, we can build on this step by learning to present such important stories with various voices, collaboration, and communication based on horizontal partnerships.

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