

Heather Mac Donald Q&A

What Happens Next – March 6th, 2022

Larry Bernstein:

Do we need docents?

Heather Mac Donald:

Of course, there should be docents. It's a fantastic reservoir of unpaid expertise that museums have long counted on. The training program at The Art Institute which began in 1961 was the equivalent of an MFA in art history. It was rigorous, disciplined, students had to do homework and they have to do constant training. Volunteerism is one of the bedrocks of civil society and people who want to donate their time is something to be celebrated, not castigated.

Larry Bernstein:

Jay Greene, currently at the Heritage Foundation, did a study on the educational benefits of art museum tours for students. And what he found through a randomized study is that students that visited an art museum learned more than they did in a classroom. And kids wanted to go back to the museums with their friends and parents. How do you think about the role of the art museum in teaching art and culture?

Heather Mac Donald:

There's no substitute for being in the presence of great works. Art illustrations can never capture the immediacy of an artwork, the brushwork, the color, the scale, the light. Coming into a museum is an essential first step. But obviously, our K through 12 system is a vacuum when it comes to solid training in Western civilization and the evolution of literary style, of the visual arts, of architecture.

Going to art museums should be essential in any student's education, certainly by the time he's in college.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you understand the argument that white women should not be docents?

Heather Mac Donald:

No. It is an unbelievably facile argument. It only works one way. Nobody objects to Blacks teaching whites. Reverse it and that is somehow oppressive. The early 20th century in this country managed to assimilate waves of immigrants from impoverished, rural, European cultures by largely female white teachers who established high standards, expected conformity to essential middle-class norms of behavior and were colorblind. They made no exceptions, they didn't engage in the current excuse that expecting promptness or accuracy, or cleanliness,

or respect for authority was just a white norm that was oppressive to the traditional Anglo-American culture.

That argument is a recipe for racial resentment. It gives students an excuse not to put in any effort to look at education through the absolute trivialities of race and gender, rather than plunging headlong into the mystery of the past, into the greatness of creation. And to lose their own petty, narrow selves in something far greater and more sublime than they could yet imagine.

Larry Bernstein:

Was there any evidence of discrimination in the selection of the docent volunteers?

Heather Mac Donald:

Zero. Anybody who wanted to sign up and was willing to put in the hours that it took to be adequately versed in the history of art. Now, what has been proposed for The Art Institute is foregoing a hundred highly trained volunteers who were willing to work for hours a week inculcating students into how to see art. The alternative now is six part-time paid volunteers.

They will no way be able to cover the tours that the docents were giving. This racial line drawing that presumes that we are unable to speak across color lines is just extraordinarily destructive and will narrow our social and creative possibilities.

Larry Bernstein:

Does it matter that the docents were volunteers? You sometimes hear that unpaid internship are unfair because of the inherent inequity for those students that lack resources and need to find paid work. Do you think anything about the docent firing relates to the voluntary aspect of the position?

Heather Mac Donald:

I get that idea of unpaid internships being a luxury that students with more affluent parents can afford. But the people serving as docents are not using their docentships as legs up into the employment world. It's a gift, that's all it is. I'm not convinced that there are people from the favored demographic groups who have been prevented from serving because of the volunteer nature of this. If there are that doesn't require sacking the people who have trained out of love, wanting to share their passion for art with as many people as possible.

As a matter of public policy, this should be denounced.

The anti-White bias that we saw in the Art Institute is now the modus operandi in practically every mainstream institution, certainly in the academy where White males are at the bottom of the heap, been getting academic jobs that includes in STEM which is discarded a meritocracy and an emphasis on scientific knowledge in favor of the trivialities of gonads and melanin.

Larry Bernstein:

In one of your recent articles this month in the City Journal magazine, you mention that the art curators are adding text on the wall next to the art work that is politically charged and not relevant to the art.

Heather Mac Donald:

Well, yeah, it's hilarious. I wrote about the Metropolitan Museum of Art contrasting two simultaneous exhibits that are up right now, and their attitude towards what art should be presenting. They have a small show of the Dutch masters from the Baroque period. The most well-known names are Rembrandt Halls and Vermeer, and the wall text accompanying the Met's own holdings, complained about the fact that these Dutch Baroque painters didn't spend enough time painting scenes of slavery and colonialism and the oppression of the Dutch Republic.

And it even berates some of its gorgeous still lifes, these marvelous composition of luminescent silverware, glassware, peeled lemons, oysters, extraordinarily creamy fabrics, faults them for also not portraying slavery and anti-colonialism. Well, this is particularly stupid because a still life by definition does not have human subjects, it's objects. A still life that portrays slavery is somewhat of a mystery. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam that has rewritten 80 of its wall labels from its Dutch masterpiece collection to complain about the lack of attention to slavery and colonialism.

It has the audacity to attack the greatest masterpiece by Rembrandt and its greatest holding of the Night Watch, which shows the civil guard of Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum complains that there's no Blacks in the picture. Well, Amsterdam's Black population was below 1% at that time.

Larry Bernstein:

Most people do not read the wall text, does it matter if occasionally it is drivel?

Heather Mac Donald:

I don't think a wall text is drivel. I read them. I think they can provide valuable historical context. They can lead the viewer to see how a composition works. It's a valid addition to an art museum that viewers can choose to read.

A museum's role is not just a slap a bunch of paintings on a wall.

Larry Bernstein:

Given the current polarization, should we insist that museums textual analysis avoid political topics and stick to the facts: the name of the artist and the work, what school of art, the name of the benefactor, and the year it was produced?

Heather Mac Donald:

I want to congratulate you for adding an aspect of wall text, which is the provenance, who the donor was and when. I find it very interesting in exhibits that are collected from different museums to read where they're actually housed. It's a fascinating map of our cultural world to

know that this painting is in Fort Worth. The migration of these great works throughout the world.

Would I ban the information in wall texts to include just the bare minimum of facts?

No, I'd rather reform them. I would rather put pressure on museums to discard their virtue signaling role as proponents of racial justice. I would just put pressure on those institutions to discard this specious, social justice agenda and get back to their core competence.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's turn to the choice of which artists to have major exhibits. There seems to be resistance to doing shows for dead white men. Yet, today the Phillips Gallery in DC is showing Picasso's Blue Period paintings. Should Picasso get a national tour or has the time for dead white male artists passed.

Heather Mac Donald:

A former trustee told me that the Whitney Museum of Art curators proposed a retrospective of a major American artist, and was just told outright, "Can't do it. Wrong race, wrong gender." That is going on across the board now.

Larry Bernstein:

In Chicago, there is a privately run, for-profit Van Gogh Exhibit that uses large scale moving images of his paintings in an event space. The exhibits are packed, day and night. The crowd is young and hip and much more crowded than your typical museum that is usually nearly empty. Even more surprising is the expressions on the audience's faces. They are riveted and seem to be really enjoying the show.

Whatever happened for the imperative to put asses in the seats.

Going back to my example of the Picasso Blue Period show, if museums will not exhibit this content, should for-profits produce these blockbusters? How about a market solution?

Heather Mac Donald:

That's a good question. There is something to being in the presence of these works. And a video or a photographic reproduction simply cannot convey the immediacy of this canvas. That said, cameras can do things that the human eye cannot do, as far as closeups that can be illuminating. The-for-profit world can provide a supplement. But there is nothing that is an adequate substitute for these collections that were donated by people who wanted to share the beauty of art.

Larry Bernstein:

I was 11 years old when King Tut came to Chicago. This was my first blockbuster show. And the blockbuster show has become a phenomenon. It is a major fundraising source for art museums. But if the art museums will not show blockbusters, somebody will.

Heather Mac Donald:

It's an interesting good question. These institutions are going to be torn. Because, one thing driving this rapid race towards social justice, virtue signaling, and it is undeniably true that foundation funders, Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, are absolutely explicit that they are only going to give money to the fine arts, whether it's to a museum or to a classical music organization, if that organization is changing its staff demographics based on race, and is programming based on oppression themes. So, the museums will want to please their foundation donors.

Darren Walker, the head of the Ford Foundation, wrote an absolutely appalling op-ed in the New York Times in 2018, complaining that museum boards were white, male, and privileged. Well, talk about biting the hand that feeds you. Those are the people that are paying millions of dollars to keep these institutions running. Get rid of them and good luck keeping it going. Darren Walker is one of the most pernicious influences in the museum world.

Larry Bernstein:

If museums put the great dead white artists paintings in the basement, should we encourage that these art works be lent or sold to other institutions so that the public can enjoy them elsewhere?

Heather Mac Donald:

That's a good point. Absolutely. In my City Journal Art Institute of Chicago article, I quote James Rondeau from a speech in 2019. He recounts a conversation he had with Alice Walton, the heiresses of Walmart. She created the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas. She asked Rondeau could she have access to some of the Art Institute's mothballed collections in the basement, because the Art Institute possesses more works that have been donated than it has wall space for a touring exhibit to rural America. And Rondeau had this unbelievably condescending response, "Well, Alice, I'm not sure that rural America needs to see Toulouse-Lautrec. And this idea of you should eat your art because it's good for you, that doesn't really apply to rural America, but by the way Alice, could you please fund under resourced Black and Hispanic museums in Chicago?" And this was the only thing that Rondeau said in a lecture in Iowa in 2019 that was filled with contempt for the white board of the Art Institute, because the white board of the Art Institute was not sufficiently enthusiastic about Rondeau's social racial justice crusade, but Rondeau's explicit contempt for rural white America was the only thing that got Ken Griffin, one of the board members, exercised, and he took Rondeau to task for this.

Otherwise, the board was utterly supine, to hear itself denigrated as just a bunch of wealthy white males. Yes, it would be a good thing to show their holdings in other venues.

Larry Bernstein:

The Art Institute of Chicago mentions in its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion discussion that the museum is on the site of land originally owned and lived on by various Indian tribes. I heard similar rhetoric at the Stratford Festival in Ontario Canada before a theater production. Could you explain this virtue seeking related to land use and cultural institutions?

Heather Mac Donald:

Well, Larry, you have been paying attention. You're absolutely right, these land acknowledgments are now ubiquitous. Even university lectures are giving land acknowledgements, and it is happening across cultural institutions, and I bet you it will start happening in corporations as well. There's nothing bad in the academy that will not migrate into a corporation at a rapidly accelerating pace.

The Art Institute had nothing to do with their disappearance from the area around Lake Michigan. Is the American extermination of the Indians deplorable? Yes. These arts institutions have nothing to do with it. The near hysterical neurotic obsession of mainstream white individuals and white institutions, which is the Lady Macbethian washing of hands, the apology for real or imagined racial guilt that no other civilization is engaged.

Have we engaged in colonialism and slavery? Yes. Name me a civilization that hasn't. This fanatical self-denigration is a perversity, and it is going to cancel an entire civilization.

Larry Bernstein:

Currently on exhibit at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum is a show on Indonesia's uprising against the Dutch colonizers that included various photographs, posters, and textiles. What do you think of politically charged exhibits?

Heather Mac Donald:

I'm not against history, I'm not against cultural context, there's a demystifying impulse that sees art simply as a means of perpetuating power structure, and does not want to think of it as something that the individual artist is creating sometimes to achieve beauty, but sometimes of course with a political agenda. There has been nationalist art, art that is driven to excite people to inflame patriotic passions or revolutionary passions, and that absolutely should be acknowledged, and there's art that has also tried to awaken people to injustice whether it's Hogarth, Zola, or Goya that should be recognized.

But, what should not be done is the deconstructive gesture of reading what is not there. We look for the absences, we look for the silenced voices, that generally, I'm really generalizing here greatly, but that is often just an excuse to not look at what is in a work of art, and to politicize it.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you see any signs for optimism?

Heather Mac Donald:

(laughs) The optimistic sign will come only if people that have been given the vast privilege of curating the world's great treasures find the courage to speak out against these insane adolescents know nothing assaults. If more people do so, we will win, but if people remain silent, it is all going down.

Larry Bernstein:

Thank you, Heather.