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# Museums in the New Gilded Age: Collector exhibits in New York art museums, 1945–2010



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## ABSTRACT

How have museums in the United States been affected by the concentration of wealth and the decline in Federal support for the arts in recent decades? We address that question by tracking special exhibits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim and Whitney Museums in New York from 1945 to 2010. We find that the fraction of special exhibits devoted to and organized around patron collections declined in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the subsequent decline in government funding and growing concentration of wealth, patron exhibits did not increase in recent decades. The autonomy that professionalized museum curators achieved in the 1960s and 1970s to determine the themes and content of exhibitions has been sustained, even as organizational norms were transformed in most other realms.

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## 1. Introduction

How have museums in the United States been affected by the concentration of wealth and the decline in Federal support for the arts in recent decades? American art museums were founded in the Gilded Age, a period from the 1870s to the end of the nineteenth century, which was marked by high levels of wealth concentration and during which wealthy benefactors and collectors exerted a high degree of control over museums. That era was followed by a long mid-twentieth century interlude of greater equality and a growing role by government in financing and influencing museums

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(see Section 2). We ask if the beneficiaries of the recent growth of inequality are reasserting control over what museums exhibit in the current era of great wealth, which has been dubbed the “New Gilded Age.”

We begin by reviewing the literature on the initial organization of U.S. art museums in the nineteenth century and then trace the effects of twentieth century governmental funding on the organization and curatorial decisions of those museums. We next identify the bases of curatorial professionalism and autonomy. We then present a dataset on special exhibits at the four most prominent New York City art museums and use it to test hypotheses on the changing influence of rich collectors from the end of World War II to the present. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for U.S. museums as a whole and suggest avenues for future research.

## 2. U.S. art museums: from elite control to professional autonomy

The influence of wealthy benefactors and collectors in the original Gilded Age has been documented by DiMaggio (1982a,b; see also Temin, 1991), who shows that those initial generations of donors were not hesitant to make clear to museum administrators their preferences for the styles of art they wanted in museum collections and exhibits—including their expectations that museums show works owned or donated by benefactors and that museums should take measures to limit their visitors to an educated, middle-class, Protestant audience. These elites sought to exclude “new waves of Irish and German immigrants. . . [by replacing] the relatively undemanding leisure activities of the first part of the [nineteenth] century. . . [with] a more demanding, austere, and uplifting kind of art. They. . . founded or transformed existing museums and orchestras by excluding crowd pleasing music and visual art” (Zolberg, 1990, p. 140). Thus, reproductions of famous paintings and sculptures were banished from U.S. art museums as benefactors and museum curators devoted their energies to procuring, through donations and purchases, original works of art (Levine, 1988). Museums measured themselves largely by the quality of the art in their collections rather than by the number of visitors (Zolberg, 1981).

Rich benefactors’ control over art museums began to be undermined in the 1920s, as some municipal governments (most notably New York City and Detroit) began to provide funding to museums for “building, maintenance, and educational budgets, while trustees financed the collections, salaries, and scholarship” (DiMaggio, 1991a, p. 273). The Great Depression, by cutting into the fortunes of many wealthy Americans, reduced their ability to fund the museums they or their ancestors had founded, forcing them to share control with wealthy people of different ethnicities and backgrounds with the means to contribute to museums (Ostrower, 2002, Chapter 3) and to encourage broader attendance by the growing middle class as a way to raise revenues through admission fees (Blau, 1991; Zolberg, 1984). These more inclusive museum policies continued in the decades after World War II, as New Deal programs and progressive taxation prevented the rich from recovering their pre-1929 share of national income and wealth (Piketty and Saez, 2012).

At the same time, universities created or expanded their art history departments and “developed programs to train potential museum workers in connoisseurship and art history” (DiMaggio, 1991a, p. 273). Graduates from these programs were employed by museums and banded together to form the American Association of Museums, which received substantial funding from the Carnegie Corporation to foster professional standards for museum curators and exhibits.

By the middle of the twentieth century, curators achieved the bases to define themselves as professionals and to assert a degree of autonomy from trustees and donors in decisions about what art should be displayed and how exhibits should be organized (Zolberg, 1984). Through their own efforts and those of foundations like Carnegie, “the belief that certain work is so specialized as to be inaccessible to those lacking the required training and experience” (Freidson, 2001, p. 17), which is the conceptual basis for assertions of professional autonomy, was extended to museum curatorial work. Trustees came to “recognize. . . [that curators] insist on autonomy and authority within their professional domain. As one trustee said, ‘A great museum has great curators.’ For this reason trustees are willing to cede a certain degree of authority to professionals” (Ostrower, 2002, p. 94). As the trustee’s quote indicates, individual museums are part of a field that defines excellence, and curatorial skill and autonomy are part of the measure of museum quality.

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