

For Diversity Leaders in the Arts, Getting Hired Is Just the First Step

Cultural institutions are recruiting people of color to direct their transformation efforts. But bringing in one manager doesn't mean the work is done.



By Robin Pogrebin

Jan. 17, 2021

Growing up in a working class family in Lawrence, Mass., Rosa Rodriguez-Williams said “museums were not part of my experience.”

It is this outsider understanding that Rodriguez-Williams, who is Puerto Rican, said she brings to her new position as the first senior director of belonging and inclusion at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she aims to reach “folks who felt sort of like I felt.”

Amid a heightened sense of urgency amid the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, cultural institutions around the country are hiring their own diversity officers to increase the number of people of color on the staff and board, broaden their programming and address a widely acknowledged pattern of systemic racism.

“We no longer have to persuade each other that we should be doing this at the expense of something else,” said Daniel H. Weiss, the president and chief executive of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which recently appointed Lavita McMath Turner, an assistant dean at the City University of New York, as its first chief diversity officer.

“Now is the time for us here in our own little world to address these issues,” Weiss added, “which have been plaguing our nation for more than two centuries.”



Lavita McMath Turner, the new chief diversity officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said “equity and inclusion are everyone's responsibility.” James Estrin/The New York Times

At the same time, experts warn, longstanding challenges remain — antiracism goals that are hard to measure; finding funds to pay for these efforts; and assuming that the hiring of one dedicated advocate means the work is done.

“The principles of diversity, equity and inclusion are everyone's responsibility,” said Ms. McMath Turner, adding that she did not feel the burden “to single-handedly change the Met's 150-year history.”

The new generation of executives are coming in with a range of titles — the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles hired Russell Davis as “chief of human resources, equity and engagement”; the Art Institute of Chicago is searching for a “senior vice president of people and culture” — but they have a broad mandate that ranges from recruiting more trustees of color to changing the internal culture.

“She is an agent for institutional transformation,” Dorothy M. Kosinski, the director of the Phillips Collection in Washington, said of Makeba Clay, the museum’s first chief diversity officer, who previously worked on similar efforts at the Smithsonian and the College of Southern Maryland. “She is leading us on a profound journey of introspection, change, accountability.”

That Clay was brought on board two years ago speaks to how these issues have been building at cultural institutions, though many say the process has been too slow.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic in July established a diversity, equity and inclusion task force, which includes members of the board, orchestra and staff. Its Resident Fellows program, started in 2018, is now preparing symphonic musicians from underrepresented populations for positions in major professional orchestras.

In some cases it has taken internal investigations to hasten concrete reforms. After seventh graders and a teacher said they had been subjected to racist remarks by staff and other visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston during a 2019 field trip, the institution apologized, studied the group’s three-hour visit on security footage and interviewed dozens of people who interacted with the students.

After completing this investigation, the museum publicly committed to “changing protocols and procedures for frontline staff and guards, articulating our expectations for visitor, staff and volunteer behavior, and enhancing ongoing training for all staff and volunteers.”

“Until there is some sunlight that shines on these moments,” said Makeeba McCreary, the MFA’s chief of learning and community engagement, “it’s really easy to act like they don’t happen.”

In October, the museum also announced that Edward E. Greene had been promoted to president of the board — the first African-American person to hold that position in the MFA’s 150-year history.

“Who’s in the room influences who is on the wall,” said Greene, who is part of a new coalition of Black trustees seeking to make their art museums more diverse. “And we are working hard to ensure that broader voices are at the table — specifically Black and brown voices, which have largely been ignored.”



Edward E. Greene, president of the Board of Trustees at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. “Who’s in the room influences who is on the wall,” he said. Brad Fowler

The events of the past summer raised consciousness to a new level and accelerated diversity efforts. At the Met in June, staff members in a letter urged the museum’s leadership to acknowledge “what we see as the expression of a deeply rooted logic of white supremacy and culture of systemic racism at our institution.”

That same month, at the Guggenheim Museum, a letter signed “The Curatorial Department” demanded wholesale changes to “an inequitable work environment.”

The Guggenheim has just chosen Naomi Beckwith, a veteran senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, who is Black, to succeed its longtime chief curator, Nancy Spector, who is white. “This is not the first time in history that museums have been pushed to think more critically about the artists they show and who they hire,” said Beckwith, who, starting in June, becomes deputy director and chief curator. “The difference this time is you are seeing people of color coming into leadership positions.”

Last July, the Met issued a list of 13 commitments, including, “Hire a Chief Diversity Officer within four months.”

“Our goal in the first year is by next summer to have accomplished most of those goals,” Mr. Weiss said.

To be sure, there are those who question the sincerity of these efforts in much the same way they criticized as inadequate the statements that cultural organizations put out in the wake of George Floyd’s killing.

“I’ve been doing this work for over 22 years,” said Rodriguez-Williams of the MFA, “and I can honestly tell you that is literally always the question

that I ask myself: 'Is this performative or is this real?'"

She and other diversity officers say the answer will come from changes both quantifiable and subjective: increasing the number of people of color on staffs and boards; providing paid internships for people of color; making visitors of color feel like they belong.

Cultural leaders say they are well aware that diversity efforts could be viewed as tokenism or a passing trend. "You build credibility through your progress and that's why we created that list of commitments," Weiss said. "If we're doing them, then we're moving the institution in the right direction, and if we're not doing them, then we should be replaced."

McCreary, who in 2018 became the first person of color on the MFA's leadership team, said institutions need to evaluate managers based on clear criteria. When managers argue they can't find candidates of color, for example, organizations should say, "you don't get to hire anybody until you find someone, or you don't get a merit increase," McCreary said. "We have to have consequences."

In the past, relying on a new hire might have checked the box on diversity efforts. Now, institutions are insisting on the involvement of the full staff. "I see the entire organization as my team," said Clay, who is working on setting benchmarks for progress at the Phillips. "Hiring me is the first step of you all saying, 'We're ready to roll up our sleeves together.'"

Strapped nonprofit cultural organizations have had difficulty raising the funds to pay for dedicated diversity officers, especially when the pandemic's economic toll has forced layoffs and furloughs. Now they have recognized the importance of raising money specifically to hire these specialists (the Phillips Collection's chief diversity officer position, for example, was funded by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation).

"People realize there needs to be a professional," said Sarah James, who specializes in cultural executive searches at the firm Phillips Oppenheim. "They're finding the money for it."

What will make these hires more meaningful, experts say, is if diversity officers are overseen by institutions' top managers, not just the human resources department. "If it does not come from the top, it's not going to work," said Nancy Huckaba, a vice president at EFL Associates, an executive search firm.

Above all, experts agree, arts executives need to keep hammering away at entrenched institutional inequities — and holding themselves accountable. "It's about intentionality and purpose," said Greene, "and having the perseverance to keep pushing it — one trustee, one employee at a time."