

'First large-scale study' illuminates artist diversity in US museums

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Eighty-five percent of artists whose work is found in collections of

major U.S. museums are white, and 87 percent are male, according to new research by Chad Topaz of Williams College, MA, and colleagues. The study, published in *PLOS ONE*, also suggests that artist diversity is not strongly linked to a museum's collection mission.

Recent years have seen a spotlight on [diversity](#) within the U.S. art [museum](#) world. Museums have made efforts to increase staff and visitor diversity, relying on [demographic studies](#) to inform their decisions. Some museums are also taking steps to increase diversity in their collections. However, demographic insights to aid these efforts have been largely unavailable.

Topaz and colleagues have now conducted the first large-scale investigation of [artist](#) diversity in museums. They used artist data from 18 major U.S. museums that list their full collections online, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. They then selected 10,000 of these artist records for demographic analysis via the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk. Crowd workers produced 45,000 responses that were analyzed to generate a final report.

The analysis found that the four largest groups of artists across the 18 collections are [white men](#) (75.7 percent), [white women](#) (10.8 percent), Asian men (7.5 percent), and Hispanic/Latinx men (2.6 percent). Some museums are outliers; for instance, about 10.6 percent of artists at Atlanta's High Museum of Art are Black/African American, compared to 1.2 percent of artists across all 18 museums. The researchers also found that the stated missions underlying museums' collections had only a weak relationship with artist diversity. This suggests that museums could make their collections more diverse without altering their missional focus on particular time periods or regions.

Crowdsourced work can potentially be biased, though the authors did

subsequently validate data by checking a random sample of records. Additionally, information on some artists and artworks was incomplete—a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, these findings could aid museums' collection decisions, and the methodology could be extended to assess diversity in other settings.

Topaz adds: "We conducted the first large-scale study of the diversity of artists held in the collections of major art museums and find that an estimated 85% are white and 87% are men, lending quantitative evidence to issues of diversity that are often discussed in the art world. Additionally, we find that museums with similar collection missions can have quite different diversity profiles, suggesting that a museum wishing to increase diversity in its collection might do so without changing its emphases on specific time periods and geographic regions."

More information: Topaz CM, Klingenberg B, Turek D, Heggeseth B, Harris PE, Blackwood JC, et al. (2019) Diversity of artists in major U.S. museums. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0212852.
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