

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Commencement Speech, Harvard Extension School

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Good morning! I am honored to be here today to celebrate with you, to recognize your well-deserved achievement, and to share some insights that I have learned from 25+ years in the museum field, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Museums are places where magic happens. Museums bring the past to life, expose us to new ideas, open our eyes to mind-bending creativity, unlock the mysteries of the universe, and so much more. Museums are also eminently political, something we should be aware of and make decisions accordingly.

For me, an enduring part of working at museums has always been the close-up, personal experience of art. I started my career several decades ago at the Louvre Museum in Paris. On Tuesdays at lunchtime, when the museum was closed to the public, I would walk through the galleries on my way to the canteen where I had the *Mona Lisa*, Michelangelo's *Slaves*, and the *Venus of Milo* all to myself. That magic "one on one time" continues to be with me. The opportunity to connect with myriad and inspiring aspects of human creativity still drives my work to this day.

Yet it would be a mistake to isolate this magic from the bigger picture. Legacy institutions—the Louvre among them—reflect a history of political dominance, societal turmoil and inequality. Colonialism, the enslavement and genocide of African and native peoples, and the immense environmental destruction that went along with it are intricately connected to the thriving art market and production of the time. The sugar plantations of Haiti, for example,

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were the primary source of revenue for Enlightenment France. While research has shed light on these and many other — problematic issues, museums oftentimes remain silent about them.

A mistaken reaction is to claim that museum magic includes a safe space, a respite from politicization. I would wholeheartedly disagree. While the production or purchase of many of the objects in our stewardship is problematic, we can surely acknowledge that history and let it inform our current and future practice. I strongly believe that art, artefacts, and objects of natural heritage can be leveraged to heal wounds and to offer unexpected solutions. In doing so, we can ultimately also strengthen the relevance of cultural institutions. And that can be a very powerful form of magic, too.

I will give you a few examples from my personal experience.

Back to the Louvre. The awe inspired by the palatial galleries, the nature of my work, and my delight to be in Paris seemed to be totally divorced from the fault-lines of poverty, racism, and exclusion peculiar to France in the 1990s. They were so easy to ignore, too, given that the populations most affected by these problems were (and still are) housed mostly outside the city in the surrounding *banlieue*. Yet the Louvre museum — a child of the French Revolution, no less—also has a long history of social contribution and awareness. For starters, it was the first art museum where a visit was a civic right, not a privilege to be granted.

When I worked there, pilot programs had been created to explore impactful ways of addressing inequality. One of these programs built relationships with social service providers to focus on issues such as literacy for immigrant women from sub-Saharan Africa and the homeless. Visits to the Louvre galleries were centerpieces of these programs, with the hope of supporting a “process of social integration,” notably via the right to share prestigious public spaces with so called “mainstream” visitors. Those were the nineties, and when I share that language

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with you now, I instinctively reach for a basket of air quotes to help reframe the loaded terms of “integration” and “mainstream” in today’s climate. Well-intentioned, problematic, effective... I leave that judgment call to others. For now, I share this example as but one way a museum has taken steps to make culture part of the response to societal problems.

My career took me next to Saint Louis, Missouri—about as different from Paris as a city can be! My work there as the director of a cultural start-up, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, reflected both the magic that one can have with art as well as the importance of bringing that magic to broad audiences. The Pulitzer was purposely located on the urban fault lines of a city that is severely affected by the scourges of the 20th-century American experience the decline of manufacturing, segregation and white flight. Six miles east of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation is one of the most depressed urban areas of the U.S., East Saint Louis, and a similar distance northeast lies Ferguson, site of the killing of Michael Brown, Jr., in 2014, a black teenager shot by a police officer.

At the Pulitzer, I started work on an exhibition that checked many boxes of mainstream art success: works of two high level artists, Brancusi and Richard Serra, brought into dialogue in the beautiful minimalist space of the Foundation building designed by Tadao Ando. As I was coming to terms with both a new job and major culture shock (before moving to Missouri, my experience of the United States comprised of just a few days in New York and Chicago), I negotiated major loans from such institutions as the Guggenheim, the Philadelphia Art Museum, and Harvard... and was grappling with the major expense to realize this dream. How could that be reconciled with the poverty so visible, so tangible all around? Would that money not have been better spent in improving the projects, in providing jobs and justice, or just filling the potholes in the streets?

Yet if we start with the premise that art as a native human practice is a necessity — and not a luxury — why would we think that a rich city is more deserving of art than a devastated one? Or its inverse, that a poor community is

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less deserving of art than a rich one?

The perceived tension between urban decay and poverty on one side and art seemingly on the other one has been with me ever since. While we can probably agree that museums cannot solve the problems of the world single-handedly, divorcing ourselves from those problems might not be the right approach either. Is it about the proportionality of spending and investment? What magnitude of spending is justified for what? Is it about impact and relevance? How do we define and measure that?

In reaction to those and many more questions, my team at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation reached out to the School of Social Work at Washington University in Saint Louis. Jointly, we created and co-financed a social worker position to help my institution engage urban communities responsibly, respectfully, and inclusively. Among the many projects we undertook—each project being designed, managed, and evaluated according to evidence-based social science practice — I would like to highlight one that included 20 former prisoners and homeless veterans.

The starting point was an exhibition in which old master paintings were placed in different natural light situations; as we tend to forget, electric light was only introduced to museums in the first half of the 20th century. Our social worker forged partnerships with an organization that reinserts homeless vets and former prisoners into the work place, and with a theatre director who specialized in work with incarcerated populations. After a careful selection process, the participants went through a six-week training program. They discussed the old master works on view in the galleries, and took workshops, ranging from self-expression, elocution, and trust building, designed to increase success at future job interviews.

Participants were paid a living wage for attendance, and further support was given for those struggling with housing. They then served as tour guides, leading

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audiences of no more than 20 visitors in a procession-like format and stopping to give their own narratives in front of selected paintings. In one example, a docent-actor stood in front of a depiction by a 17th-century Italian Master, representing Mary Magdalene in penitence: “This is Mary Magdalene. She has done her time and is now seeing the light. I myself have done my time and after leaving prison, I have also seen the light ...”

Over the following two years, we were able to track outcomes for a majority of the participants. I am proud to report that most either moved on to further professional training or remained in employment. It would be an overstatement to say that we solved the divisions that plague cities like Saint Louis. However, this program had an impact beyond the participants. In all, about 1,000 visitors of considerable socio-economic and racial diversity came through on a tour; and the Pulitzer became the first cultural organization in the city to be repeatedly written up in the “Saint Louis American,” the local African American weekly. Also, many of the off-duty police officers, both African American and white, who served as gallery guards in the Foundation shifted their behaviors and beliefs: one anecdotal result was that gradually, the white officers began to join their black colleagues in volunteering to transport the participants home after long days in the Foundation.

I do realize that not many organizations can dedicate the kind of resources such programs require on a regular and scaled-up basis—and include a longitudinal study of outcomes on top of that. The point is, however, much bigger, as magic unfolds in so many ways if we are willing to think holistically and embrace wider issues of art and society. It is part of the stewardship role of museums to help activate the power of objects and ideas, not only in support of individual enjoyment but also of civic society at large.

In my current role as the director of the Worcester Art Museum, a 120-year old, medium- sized institution with an outsized collection, the magic functions differently again. I am not as directly involved with exhibitions and programs as I

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used to be. My reward continues to be personal connections to the art in the collection and in enabling my colleagues to make the magic happen for our visitors. Worcester is one of the country's most ethnically diverse cities, and we have worked hard to connect all corners of our community with the Museum.

Two examples of my colleagues' work here in Worcester, both related to one painful aspect of the past of this country. Recently, we put on display newly discovered photographs of African Americans and Native Americans, taken in Worcester at the beginning of the 20th century. Since William Bullard, the photographer, kept a log book naming his sitters, we were able to contact most descendants—many of whom did not know about their family roots. Those whom we were able to track down came from across the country, most of them not aware previously of their family roots in New England. The exhibition opening, where everyone sat for a group photograph, was a particularly moving moment. One descendant said, "There are stories I never knew until these photographs triggered conversation. It's all a blessing to me."

The second project I wanted to mention here is about slavery connections: late in 2017, we added such references to the labels of our colonial portraits; WAM's collection has some of the most iconic examples of early portraiture in this country. The reaction was extremely interesting. First there was none (it is worth exploring how many people actually read labels to begin with), but once a prominent blog mentioned our initiative, hell broke loose. Many people who hadn't even visited were commenting on our labels, board members were approached by friends from out of town; many letters were written, both complementary and outraged. We also found out that not everyone felt comfortable voicing their concerns as they were afraid to be labelled as racists. This is another example of how museums cannot really be "safe spaces" since so many ideas and realizations can feel unsafe.

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Given everything I have presented so far, if you asked me for a concluding word of advice, I would say this: No matter if you will be shaping the museums of tomorrow or the future of other institutions, you will encounter your own challenges and find your own solutions. But nothing shields you from the growing responsibilities you will have, and from the need to make the right judgements. You should be your own toughest judge, before reality does that for you. As you go on your way, I wish you the best of luck.