Introduction & Research Question

Founded in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is a universal survey, “encyclopedic” museum, displaying and interpreting works of art from all time periods and from across the globe. Today it comprises the Met Fifth Avenue, the Met Cloisters, and the Met Breuer. Once the premier art institution of NYC, it must now compete for visitors with other New York City museums. Against the backdrop of diverse audiences, new digital technologies, and the dominance of contemporary art in the global marketplace, the Met struggles to remain viable as an institution of high culture.

How does a traditional art museum stay relevant in a dramatically changed modern world?

Background

Over the last 10 years or so, the changing art environment has challenged the Metropolitan Museum to redefine its identity. Changes in leadership and vision have further disrupted the institution’s stability:

- The loss of Philippe de Montebello who, during his long tenure as director (1977-2008), adamantly refused to embrace modern and contemporary art as part of the institutional mission.
- Its new director, Thomas Campbell (2009-2017), embarks on ambitious programs to expand the Met’s reach. This includes a rapid expansion into modern and contemporary art, and the acquisition of the Met Breuer in 2016.
- The Met is beset by financial hardship, including a $15 million budget deficit and staff cuts.
- Thomas Campbell resigns under pressure in February 2017. Daniel Weiss, medievalist and president of Haverford College, appointed as CEO and President.

Methodology

Qualitative and empirical:
- Visited the Met Fifth Avenue and the Met Breuer to compare audience numbers.
- Attended lectures and gallery talks.
- Surveyed the Met’s major print publications, website, and digital media initiatives (blogs, podcasts, and social media) to assess their public outreach and programming.
- Examined major news outlets and specialized art press to see how the Met is being received and how it compares to other major U.S. museums.
- Interviewed senior staff members:
  - Laurel Britton, Chief of Staff
  - Carrie Rebora Barratt, Deputy Director of Collections and Administration

Findings

- 6% increase in attendance from 2015-2016 (paradoxically).
- Half-hearted embrace of modern and contemporary art.
- Crowded Met, empty Breuer (Figure 2).
- The Costume Institute offers the most innovative curatorial design: it has become one of the main draws to the Met (Figure 1).
- Underdeveloped digital initiatives
  - Blogs: Met Collects, 82nd & 5th, Connections, Now at the Met
  - Image problems:
    - More diverse staff, more diverse perspectives?
    - Non-competitive in terms of gift shop and dining facilities.

Conclusion & Questions

While its special exhibitions are tremendously successful, especially at the Costume Institute, the Breuer is much less so. When compared with similar institutions, the Met is limited in its engagement with issues facing the contemporary world. It additionally faces important organizational challenges in terms of diversity and vision.

- What is the Met’s public mission? Should it aim to fortify its traditional strengths? Or does it need to reimagine its role for the modern age?

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Sources