

A vibrant watercolor background featuring a rainbow spectrum of colors. The colors transition from deep red and purple on the left, through orange and yellow at the top, to blue and green at the bottom. The watercolor texture is soft and blended, with some darker, more saturated areas and lighter, more washed-out areas, creating a sense of depth and movement.

# The Queer-Inclusive Museum

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Margaret Middleton

Museums today are demonstrating an increased commitment to LGBTQ communities through exhibitions that center their stories. These queer-focused exhibitions are valuable tools for broadening representation, but the messages they carry are only as strong as the institution's commitment to queer inclusion. When queer narratives are limited to temporary exhibitions during Pride Month or isolated in queer-themed galleries, it suggests that they are “special interest” and unimportant. However, with the support of comprehensive queer inclusion, exhibitions can be stronger, more powerful tools for inclusion. This article will explore queer inclusion in four tiers: programming, temporary exhibitions, interpretive strategy, and broad institutional commitment.

## Museums have an opportunity and a responsibility to counter that dominant narrative – to choose queer inclusion.

### Becoming Visible

*Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall* was one of the first popular exhibitions about queer American history. Curated by Mimi Bowling, Molly McGarry, and Fred Wasserman, the show – which commemorated the 1969 Stonewall uprising that helped catalyze the queer rights movement – opened in 1994 at the New York Public Library. In a September 6, 1994 *New York Times* article, Wasserman explained its significance: “That the New York Public Library decided to do the

exhibition is the strongest statement of all. The New York Public Library has said: “This is important. Your lives are real. This is history.”<sup>1</sup>”

Twenty-three years later, queer-themed exhibitions are no longer singular events. Exhibitions that opened this year include *Queer British Art 1861–1967* at the Tate Britain; *The Lavender Line: Coming Out in Queens* at the Queens Museum in New York City; and *Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects* at the Henry Art Gallery (the “Henry”) in Seattle, Washington. Queer stories are becoming more visible in museums, but representation alone does not amount to inclusion.

### Why Queer Inclusion

In a society in which people are assumed straight and cisgender until proven otherwise,<sup>2</sup> museums that omit or ignore queer issues support a heteronormative, cis-centric dominant narrative.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual museum visitors are negatively impacted by not seeing their identities and experiences reflected in museum content.<sup>4</sup> Museums have an opportunity and a responsibility to counter that dominant narrative – to choose queer inclusion.

Queer representation can also help build empathy in straight and cisgender visitors. According to Wilkening Consulting, which has conducted extensive studies on the role of the museum in American society, one in five regular museumgoers (described as visiting museums three or more

1 David W. Dunlap, “Library’s Gay Show Is an Eye-Opener, Even for Its Subjects,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1994; see: <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/06/arts/library-s-gay-show-is-an-eye-opener-even-for-its-subjects.html>.

2 Mel Reiff Hill and Jay Mays define cisgender people as “individuals whose gender identity usually corresponds with the sex assigned to them at birth” (not transgender). See M. Reiff Hill and J. Mays, *The Gender Book* (Houston: Marshall House Press, 2013), 41.

3 Chrys Ingraham, “Thinking Straight, Acting Bent,” in *Handbook of Gender and Women’s Studies* (London: Sage, 2006), 307.

4 J. Heimlich and J. Koke, J., “Gay and lesbian visitors and cultural institutions: do they come? Do they care? A pilot study,” *Museums and Social Issues* 3, 1 (2009): 93–104.

times a year) report that visiting museums has given them a greater awareness of others.<sup>5</sup>

### **Four Tiers of Commitment to Queer Inclusion**

Though more popular queer-themed exhibitions have been appearing in museums since *Becoming Visible*, getting them to the approval stage continues to be a challenge. Diversity and inclusion work is often spearheaded and carried out by low-level staff members with little to no support from the administration. For true queer inclusion to take hold, support must come from an institutional level.

Fortunately, in the right environment, small change can lead to institutional change. Richard Sandell, a professor of museum studies whose work focuses on equality and social justice, writes, “Everyday decisions made in the course of museum work have social consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

Commitment to queer inclusion is about an expression of values through words and actions. Here is an outline of the four tiers of queer inclusion, starting with the easiest steps to take. Notice that the higher levels of commitment to queer inclusion are signified by greater public access and financial commitment on behalf of the institution. A well-rounded commitment to queer inclusion includes all four tiers.

**1. Queer-Themed Programming** Programming is one of the easiest way for museums to begin the process of queer inclusion. Unlike exhibitions, which are usually more time and budget intensive, programming can often be developed by fewer people and achieved with minimal funds. Programs also do not always require director-level approval, so they can sometimes fly under the radar. The downside? Programs can fly under the radar for visitors too.

Without queer-inclusive context, programming is an isolated moment for a select group of people. For example, the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in the Greater Los Angeles Area hosted its fourth annual “Evening Among the Roses” this year, a “celebration of the LGBTQ+ community.”<sup>7</sup> A visitor who did not attend the \$110 event would likely not be aware of the institution’s interest in the queer community. Especially if they attended the concurrent exhibition *Octavia E. Butler: Telling My Stories*, in which a large portion of the award-winning science fiction author’s story was omitted: the fact that she was a lesbian.

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### **2. Temporary Queer-Themed Exhibitions**

Exhibitions show deeper commitment to queer inclusion than programming in that they reach more visitors, require more funding, and require the backing of museum leadership. This year the Henry hosted *Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects*, an exhibition by the Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art, an “imaginary museum” that began as a conceptual art project by founder Chris E. Vargas. Because the term transgender is culturally specific and relatively new term, the history of trans people is complicated to capture. The artworks in the exhibition tell the stories of “transgender, gender non-binary, and gender-transgressive identities and expressions.”<sup>8</sup>

7 See “An Evening Among the Roses,” the Huntington, accessed July 22, 2017, <http://www.huntington.org/amongtheroses/>.

8 Minh Nguyen, “An ‘Imaginary Museum’ at Henry Art Gallery Enlivens Queer and Trans History: A Q&A with Chris E. Vargas, organizer of ‘Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects,’” *Seattle Weekly*, May 31, 2017, <http://www.seattleweekly.com/arts/a-q-trans-hirstory-in-99-objects>.

5 Conversation with Susie Wilkening of Wilkening Consulting, July 2017.

6 Richard Sandell, *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 24.

*Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects*'s 10-month run was complemented by trans-themed programming and (intentionally or not) coincided with Seattle's annual Pride Parade and national Trans Day of Visibility. I happened to attend the exhibition on Trans Day of Visibility which made it a particularly meaningful visit for me. At the same time, if queer representation in the museum begins and ends with a singular, temporary exhibition, it can suggest to visitors (and staff) that queerness is only appropriate to discuss in an exhibition about queerness itself and only relevant during certain times of the year. As Porchia Moore writes, "All culture is connected. We must be cautious to not send the message that minority visitors are merely niche or annual visitors."<sup>9</sup> While the Henry does not have permanent gallery space devoted to queer art, they do have gender inclusive restrooms that predate the exhibition and have lived on after the exhibit closed.

## Queer stories are becoming more visible in museums, but representation alone does not amount to inclusion.

**3. Queer Narratives Interpreted Throughout the Museum** Permanent exhibitions are especially powerful. Oliver Winchester of the Wellcome Collection in London and previous Head of the Victoria & Albert LGBTQ Network states, "Events may be high profile...yet in general they cannot be said to have a legacy or

9 Porchia Moore, "The Danger of the D Word: Museums and Diversity," *The Inclusionum*, January 20, 2014; see: <https://inclusionum.com/2014/01/20/the-danger-of-the-d-word-museums-and-diversity>.

weight comparable to permanent displays or major headline exhibitions."<sup>10</sup> Museums should be actively acquiring artworks and objects with queer significance, but exhibition developers and interpretative planners do not need to wait for buy-in from the collections department to start telling queer stories with artwork and objects already in the collection or on view in exhibitions. For example, earlier this year the Portland Museum of Art in Maine showed *The Mistress and the Muse* – an exhibition that was not queer-themed. Next to a painting by French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec – *Two Women Making Their Bed* – was a label with these words: "The painting captures the mundane tasks of two anonymous women who share an unknown intimacy – perhaps lovers, friends, or family – as they stretch a sheet to cover a bed." Toulouse-Lautrec has been noted for depicting lesbians in his work.<sup>11</sup>

At the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, curator Aaron Bryant describes their interpretive strategy regarding queer stories this way:

The lives and contributions of LGBT communities are an integral part of the larger story we tell. These stories aren't isolated or segregated from the larger narrative, but are a natural and intrinsic part of the broader story we're sharing regarding the broad contributions of African Americans to American history and culture.<sup>12</sup>

By including queer narratives throughout the museum experience, queer history can be

10 Oliver Winchester, "A Book With its Pages Always Open," in Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, eds., *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (London and New York: Routledge: 2012), 144.

11 Suzanne Karr Schmidt, "Looking at Toulouse-Lautrec's Lesbians Today," *Art Institute of Chicago*, December 8, 2016; see: <http://www.artic.edu/blog/2016/11/28/interpreting-toulouse-lautrecs-lesbians>.

12 Clarence J. Fluker, "New Smithsonian Places African American LGBT Community in Full View," *Center for Black Equity*, August 21, 2016; see: <http://centerforblackequity.org/new-smithsonian-places-african-american-lgbt-community-in-full-view>.

integrated into the broader narrative. This approach also helps show queerness together with other identities including gender, race, class, ethnicity, and immigration status. By avoiding queerness in isolation, museums can avoid one-dimensional interpretation and show visitors a diversity of queer stories. If interpreting queer narratives is new territory for your institution, Susan Ferentinos's book – *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* – is a good primer on the subject.<sup>13</sup>

**4. Broad Institutional Commitment to LGBTQ Community** Institutional commitment means museum-wide support of queer inclusion, both internally and externally. This means writing queer inclusion into the values statement of the institution, recruiting queer board members, and updating the collections policy to include the conscious collection of artwork by queer artists and historical objects of queer significance.

Museums can demonstrate their commitment to queer inclusion through carefully crafted language, policies, and facilities. A good place to start is with the LGBTQ welcoming guidelines created by the American Alliance of Museum's LGBTQ Alliance.<sup>14</sup> For example, family membership forms should work for families of all kinds. Don't assume gendered honorifics and offer "opt out" or the gender-inclusive "Mx." Offer all-gender restrooms, and make it clear that visitors are welcome to use the bathroom that best matches their identity. Train staff to use family-inclusive language in interactions with visitors and use it consistently across all communication platforms including signage, social media, and the museum website.

Staff policies should also reflect the museum's stance on queer inclusion. Hire queer staff members and make sure the museum's nondiscrimination

13 Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield), 2015.

14 See Welcoming Guidelines for Museums, May 2016, at [http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/professional-networks/lgbtq\\_welcome\\_guide.pdf](http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/professional-networks/lgbtq_welcome_guide.pdf).

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clause includes sexual orientation and gender identity. Do away with gender-specific dress codes. Staff health benefits should grant non-gestational and adoptive parent leave, include mental health, healthcare for transgender staff members, and healthcare benefits should be extended to non-married partners.

As with all diversity and inclusion efforts, the work of queer inclusion is never done. Queer inclusion task groups can ensure that queer inclusion is an ongoing process. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has an employee resource group for queer staff members called the Outfielders, whose mission is to "create a safe, welcoming place at The Field Museum dedicated to promoting the inclusion of people of all genders and sexual orientations."<sup>15</sup>

The Victoria & Albert Museum in London established an LGBTQ Working Group in 2006 to "[unearth] previously hidden or unknown LGBTQ histories in the collections and aims to facilitate understanding of LGBTQ identities and histories through

15 See "The Outfielders," the Field Museum, accessed July 22, 2017, <https://www.fieldmuseum.org/about/employee-groups/outfielders>.

research, events, discussion and debate.” Dan Vo, volunteer coordinator for and founder of the V&A’s LGBTQ Tour, explains how the LGBTQ Working Group supports his work:

the LGBTQ Working Group clearly provides precedent for our volunteer activities, provides us with ongoing support and resources, connects us with a wider network of supporters and mentors, and helps to bring in new objects and ways of thinking that in turn enable us to constantly improve, or to put it differently, helps future-proof our work.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Queer-Inclusive Museum of the Future**

The queer-inclusive museum strives for representation, communication, and accommodation for queer people and narratives across the institution, all year round. Permanent exhibitions are some of the most visible, accessible, and well-funded aspects of the museum experience and therefore have a unique and important role to play in this endeavor. Museums can strengthen the impact of exhibitions by demonstrating comprehensive queer inclusion at all four tiers: programming, temporary exhibitions, interpretive strategy, and broad institutional support. As museums deepen their commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, practitioners from all departments and at all levels of the museum can and will continue to examine and redefine what it means to be a queer-inclusive museum. ■

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<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Dan Vo, August 2017.

