

Museum Fees Promote a Cultural Apartheid

Why must the public pay to see cultural art works that already belong to them? Almost all of New York City's major museums charge admission fees. And those fees are inexorably increasing. The Museum of Modern Art charges \$25 to get in the front door; ten years ago it charged \$12. The Guggenheim charges \$22, the Whitney, and the Frick charge \$18. And many cultural institutions charge extra for "special exhibits." The admission fee covering all exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History is now \$33 for adults and \$20.50 for children. That's over \$100 for a family of four. How many working class families can afford that?

Then there is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, arguably the world's greatest encyclopedic museum. Last July, the Met raised its admission price from \$20 to \$25. Ten years ago, the admission price was less than half. But the Met's admission is "recommended." That is, you can pay anything and get in. It says so in very small print at the admissions desk – so small that many visitors to the museum think they are required to pay the entire \$25 fee.

Lawsuit against the Met

A few weeks ago, two members of the Met filed a lawsuit against the museum, contending that its fee policy is intended to "deceive and defraud" the public, making them believe that the \$25 fee is mandatory rather than suggested. The object of the suit is to require that entrance to the Met be free; that it not charge any admission fee.

Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a systematic process of denying low- and moderate-income New Yorkers access to public cultural institutions. Children from these families ought to be encouraged to go to these places. Instead, millions of New Yorkers – who subsidize these institutions – have been priced out of them.

Major New York cultural institutions are publicly funded, primarily through tax-deductible contributions and city, state, and federal tax dollars. And they pay no property taxes. Since they get city funds, admission should be free, but the violation of the Lease and Free Admission Statute (Chapter 476 of the Laws of 1893) is not enforced. The city's Cultural Institutions Group operates on city-owned land and receives significant taxpayer support in exchange for providing services that are accessible to the public – but at a price. The price is too high.

New York's museums draw millions of visitors to the city from all over the world. Yet many residents of the city cannot afford to enter these institutions. The cost of culture in New York City – already higher than in any other American city – has effectively priced out a large segment of the city's population.

In a survey conducted by the Community Service Society several years ago, 58 percent of low-income New Yorkers said that they rarely visited museums, zoos, or other cultural institutions. When they were asked why, one in five – which computes to 400,000 low-income New Yorkers – said that these places cost too much.

The American Association of Museums contends that admission fees cover only a fraction of the cost of serving museum visitors. If that is true, then returning to free admissions would mean forgoing only a small amount of income. This is not a call for these institutions to commit financial suicide. Public officials could craft innovative tax policies that along with private endowments could reduce and eventually eliminate admission fees.

It has been successfully done in other cities. London's great museums are free – the National Gallery, both Tate museums, the Victoria and Albert, the National Portrait Gallery are all free. Throughout the United Kingdom, most museums have been free to the public since 2001, when the government offered a program of tax rebates in exchange for eliminating entrance fees. In the first year of the program, attendance at British museums increased by an average of nearly 70 percent.

Many museums across the country do not charge admission fees. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and the Cleveland Museum of Art are free. So are museums in Minneapolis, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cincinnati.

A City Divided

This is a tale of two cities. The tax dollars of all city residents are being spent to support institutions that only a few can afford. This situation goes beyond dollars and cents. In a city where one-fifth of the population lives in poverty and more than one-third lives in low-income families, these fees promote a separation – a social and economic segregation - that is unhealthy for the well-being of the city.

New York's museums are our cultural jewels. They should be free to everyone. There was a time when museums in the city were free. Maybe this lawsuit brought against the Met will begin a process to return our great cultural institutions to the public, not just to those who can pay these ever-increasing admission fees. We must break down this damaging cultural elitism, where these institutions serve primarily people of great wealth.

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