The Met – An Examination of its Colonial Past, Oligarchy-Driven Expansion, and Representation Bias

## Abstract/Goal of the Research

This research examines the historical foundations of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, focusing on its ties to colonial history and the influence of wealthy, powerful figures who shaped its early development. While acknowledging these aspects, it is also important to recognize the Met’s significant achievements as a global cultural institution. As James Panero (2020) notes in ‘Unmaking the Met,’ the museum has, beyond all expectation, achieved the Enlightenment idea of the encyclopedic museum, serving as a ‘city in the city, a cosmos for the cosmopolitan, expansive and uncontainable, a home for culture owned by no one person and belonging to all.’ This research aims to uncover biases in the museum’s art collection and operations, particularly in race, gender, and class representation, using data-driven analysis from sources like the iMet 2021 dataset. By exploring how historical socio-political dynamics influenced the museum’s collection, we propose solutions to address under-representation and promote a more equitable distribution of artworks, while also appreciating its enduring legacy as a repository of human creative urges.

## Timeline + Eras

* **1870**: The Met’s Founding [1](#ref1). Despite its relatively young age of 150 years, the Met has achieved, beyond all expectation, the Enlightenment idea of the encyclopedic museum, presenting the ‘whole stream of art-history in all nations and ages’ (Panero, 2020). Its creation through private contributions is a unique achievement in cultural history.
* **Late 1870s – 1890s**: The Gilded Age, characterized by the rise of Oligarch Collectors and Robber Barons who influenced art and museums.
* **1891**: The Met declared Sunday hours, but remained closed on Sundays, the only day factory workers and laborers could visit, highlighting class bias [2](#ref2).
* **1910s**: The Met hired its first-generation woman curators [3](#ref3), [4](#ref4).
* **1924**: Opening of The Met’s American Wing [5], coinciding with the United States Congress passing the Johnson-Reed Act [6], which set racist immigration quotas. This suggests a connection between the museum’s exhibits and nationalistic, exclusionary policies.

### Oligarch Collectors

* **Henry Havemeyer** (1847-1907): Sugar magnate, influential art collector who used art and museums to expand influence and power [7](#ref7).
* **J.P. Morgan** (1837-1913): Banking titan, whose influence extended to railroads, steel, and finance. An early supporter and significant benefactor of The Met, serving as its president from 1904 until his death in 1913 [8](#ref8), [9](#ref9).
* **Luigi Palma di Cesnola** (1832-1904): Italian immigrant, first director of The Met [10](#ref10), supplied Cypriot antiquities, and was a ‘robber baron’ of a different sort [11](#ref11).

### Misogynists

* **Sir Caspar Clarke**: Second director of The Met, openly misogynistic, jokingly referred to female audiences as ‘gushers’ [12](#ref12).

### Key Figures in The Met

* **George Blumenthal** (1858-1941): First Jewish Trustee of The Met [13](#ref13).
* **Henry Kent** (1866-1948): The Met’s secretary and chief librarian, involved in the unofficial policy to limit the number of Jews on the museum’s staff [16](#ref16).

### Women in The Met’s Early History

* **First-generation woman curators**: Hired in the 1910s, marking a shift in the museum’s staffing.
* **Female audiences/staff**: Despite women’s influence in national art organizations, The Met initially denied them cultural leadership opportunities, excluded female staff from the men’s restaurant, and lacked a ‘ladies committee’ [17](#ref17).

## Colonial History Past + Racial Prejudice

* The Met’s gentleman rulers looked down on most people. Conlin devotes considerable attention to the Met’s triple legacy of racism, sexism and antagonism towards workers [14](#ref14).
* The Met’s curators romanticized the nation’s early colonists with displays of Revolutionary-era silverware, cabinets, teacups and so forth [15](#ref15).
* In 1924, the Met’s American Wing opened in the same year that the United States Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act [6](#ref6) (which set racist immigration quotas). This suggests a connection between the museum’s exhibits and nationalistic, exclusionary policies.
* After George Blumenthal was elected as the first Jewish trustee of the Met [13](#ref13), an unofficial policy came into effect to limit the number of Jews on the museum`s staff to no more than three [16](#ref16).

## Oligarchy-Dominant Beginnings

* The Met`s early decades epitomize how robber barons benefited from the museum enterprise. Through art collecting, industrialists aspired to refashion themselves into aristocrats. Purchases of masterpieces fed into their larger ambitions. However, as Panero (2020) suggests, a more charitable understanding would be to see this as an example of the great beneficence of capital in the service of culture, unlike those European collections created through the church, the state, or force of arms. J. Pierpont Morgan, for instance, believed that `the happiness of a whole people can be increased through the cultivation of taste,` and strongly desired to contribute to that end among his own countrymen (Panero, 2020).
* Conlin proposes the term `oligarch-collector` to define art buyers like the sugar mogul Henry Havemeyer (1847-1907) and the banking tycoon J. P. Morgan (1837-1913). Both were early supporters of the Met.
* For oligarch-collectors, auction house bidding wars were sporting matches between `friendly rivals`. Like elite athletes, they competed for the chance to own a rare bronze; at the same time, they were united in their desire to control every aspect of the game. The Met`s oligarch-collectors used their combined strength to dominate markets and supply chains.
* They fought against tariffs that disadvantaged their business interests (including the flow of art from Europe). They dodged antitrust laws. They manipulated the stock market, and to avoid taxes, they `outsourced lobbying against estate and other taxes to the museums on whose boards they sat`, arguing that `an elite pastime was enough of a public good to justify taxpayer subsidy of art collecting` (pp. 65-6).
* The Met`s first director, Luigi Palma di Cesnola (1832-1904), was a robber baron of a different sort. A self-trained archaeologist with faded aristocratic credentials, the Italian immigrant cozied up to the Met`s inner circle. Cesnola took it upon himself to excavate, `restore`, and bring to New York (for a price) the Met`s first noteworthy collection: tens of thousands of Cypriot antiquities, many of questionable quality, provenance and authenticity. Cesnola`s profiteering was eventually disavowed and most objects jettisoned.

## Representation Bias

* Conlin devotes considerable attention to the Met’s triple legacy of racism, sexism and antagonism towards workers [14](#ref14). While acknowledging these historical biases, it is also important to consider the museum’s broader mission as an encyclopedic institution. As Panero (2020) highlights, the Met aims to present the “whole stream of art-history in all nations and ages,” striving for a comprehensive representation of human creative urges.
* Women had been highly influential in the nation’s art organizations in the early nineteenth century; not so at the Met. The museum’s second director, Sir Caspar Clarke, was openly misogynistic, jokingly referred to female audiences as ‘gushers’. For decades, women staff were not allowed to eat in the museum restaurant with the men. The Met did not even have a ‘ladies committee’. Conlin observes, ‘the refusal [in its early years] to provide women with opportunities to exercise even this limited form of cultural leadership at the Met is remarkable’ (p. 86) [17](#ref17).

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