



THE CENSORSHIP HORIZON: A SURVEY OF ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Findings	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Results	7
Finding 1: There is No Consensus Surrounding Censorship in Art Museums	7
Finding 2: Art Museum Directors Experience Pressures to Censor from Many Sources	9
Finding 3: Perceptions of Future Censorship Threats Fall Along Partisan Lines	11
Finding 4: Many Directors’ Decisions Fall in a “Gray Zone” Between Self-Censorship and Curation	16
Finding 5: Most Art Museums Deal With Censorship on an Ad Hoc Basis – But Written Policies Could Be Vital	19
Conclusion	21
Acknowledgments	21

Published January 14, 2024

For a web version of this report, visit pen.org



KEY FINDINGS

While a vast majority of surveyed art museum directors believe that censorship is at least somewhat of a problem for art museums today, 90% of respondents do not have a written censorship policy, to set out procedures for responding to formal or informal challenges, including under what conditions it might alter exhibitions

Common third rails in the art museum world include art that refers to the Israel/Palestine conflict, or art that criticizes Christianity, particularly when it comes to certain religiously-motivated efforts to censor nudity or sexuality.

Museum directors surveyed in summer 2024 tended to view censorship as a challenge that is worsening, and on the horizon—a future problem. Perceptions of future censorship threats fall along partisan lines, with 41% of respondents indicating fear of censorship from Republican officials as opposed to only 3% indicating fear of Democratic officials.

Due to the curatorial work inherent to the museum field, the question of what qualifies as *curation* and what qualifies as *censorship* or *self-censorship* remains blurred. But this blurriness does not mean that censorship and curation should be equated. If the pressure to self-censor continues to rise in the art world, it is this very gray zone between curation and censorship that could be most leveraged and exploited by censors.

INTRODUCTION

Art museums occupy a distinct space in the landscape of American cultural and educational institutions. According to a 2021 [survey](#) of 1,200 Americans, both museum-goers and non-visitors described museums as the first and second-most trusted source of information in U.S. society, respectively. For non-visitors, museums were second only to “friends and family,” and for both groups, museums ranked far ahead of the internet, political leaders, or even media outlets.

But there is also a long history of challenges and controversies in the art-world; such is the name of the game when working within the bounds of a field that, regardless of museums’ mission to preserve the past, is often propelled to seek out the exploratory, the cutting-edge, and the avant-garde. In recent years, [a spate](#) of art exhibition [cancellations](#) at museums and other efforts to censor artistic expression around the country have generated concern in the art world and beyond. Whether it’s the [censorship](#) and cancellation of artists working on issues related to Israel and Palestine, the [closing of art exhibitions](#) accused of [being insensitive to racism](#), or the [politicization](#) of museums’ usage of terms like “diversity” and “inclusion”, these events indicate how the creation and display of art is entwined with the U.S.’s most fraught cultural and political debates.

At the same time, we have seen a rising tide of state-mandated legislative efforts at censorship of literature and education, which has threatened to encompass museums, too. In 2023, three bills were introduced—[SB 2123](#) in North Dakota, [HB 3826/SB 506](#) in South Carolina, and [HB 2980](#) in West Virginia—that would remove exemptions from criminal liability for exhibiting sexually explicit material or nudity to minors for bona fide professionals engaged in education, including museum workers. These exemptions are a vital protection for ensuring that museums can continue to share artwork that depicts nudity: if such bills were to pass, something as banal as an ancient Greek statue could open a museum or its employees to criminal liability.

All three bills failed in 2023, and, with the exception of a repeated unsuccessful effort in [West Virginia](#) in early 2024, similar bills have not been filed. Even so, the formal introduction of these bills in state legislatures represent a threat to artistic freedom, the freedom of the public, and the museum sector. Indeed, the “[Project 2025](#)” proposal from the Heritage Foundation, created to influence the incoming Trump Administration’s policies, proposes a similar attitude to sexual content in public libraries, suggesting that librarians who offer books with such content for minors—especially LGBTQ+ content—should be treated as criminals. If such policies do end up being adopted on a nationwide level, they could similarly leap from schools and libraries to the museum sector.



In light of these alarming occurrences, the [Association of Art Museum Directors](#) (AAMD), [PEN America](#), and [Artists at Risk Connection](#) (ARC) partnered to investigate the current state of censorship – and self-censorship – as viewed and experienced by AAMD members.¹

Through a survey of AAMD members we sought to understand: How much censorship do they perceive is occurring in the art museum world, in what form, and for what reason? Where do these professionals see threats of censorship emanating from? How do these recent trends compare to those of the past? And is the [recent spate of state legislation targeting public education](#) having an effect in these institutions, or is any such concern overblown?

AAMD represents more than 220 of the leading art museums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. This survey focused on museum directors working in the U.S. [AAMD member](#) institutions must have “an annual operating budget of \$2 million or higher,” and of those museum directors who completed the survey, almost a quarter work at institutions that maintain an annual endowment of more than \$20 million. This population thus represents only a sliver of the museum sector in the U.S. as a whole. Nonetheless, it is a group of individuals and institutions who can offer insight on these larger questions.

METHODOLOGY

We collaborated with [Slover Linett at NORC](#) to survey AAMD’s membership regarding their concerns about and experiences with censorship, administering a questionnaire online from June 24-July 11, 2024. We received 95 responses, out of a total of 220 individuals who received surveys (43%). Not all respondents answered every question.

The majority of respondents serve as directors at general/encyclopedic art museums with a wide breadth of subject areas, although a smaller number work at museums focused on a specific artistic period, theme, or cultural context. About 65% of respondents work at independent museums, with the remaining 35% working at museums operated by larger institutions (e.g., universities or governments). Over half of the respondents reported that their museums are located in urban areas. Among the individual respondents, over 95% are over the age of 40, and over 90% have at least one graduate degree.

Debates about what constitutes censorship in art museums are not new and can impact everything from acquisitions to exhibitions to public programs. And, pressure to censor can come from many directions, diverse stakeholders, and for evolving political, social, and cultural reasons. To reflect this point, our survey instrument avoided imposing a strict definition of “censorship” at the outset, seeking instead to elicit understanding of how

¹ Note that some examples of art museum censorship mentioned in this report involve AAMD member museums and some do not.

respondents make meaning of “censorship.” In other words, respondents’ self-definition of “censorship” is the definition that guided their responses. Our survey instrument sought to probe a range of potential sources for censorship in the minds of respondents as well as the question of self-censorship, when curators or museum leaders engage in preemptive censorship out of fear or some other concern.

Below, we organize discussion of the survey around five major findings.

Finding 1: There is No Consensus Surrounding Censorship in Art Museums

Finding 2: Art Museum Directors Experience Pressures to Censor from Many Sources

Finding 3: Perceptions of Future Censorship Threats Fall Along Partisan Lines

Finding 4: Some Directors’ Decisions Fall in a “Gray Zone” Between Self-Censorship and Curation

Finding 5: Most Art Museums Deal With Censorship on an Ad Hoc Basis – But Written Policies Could Be Vital



RESULTS

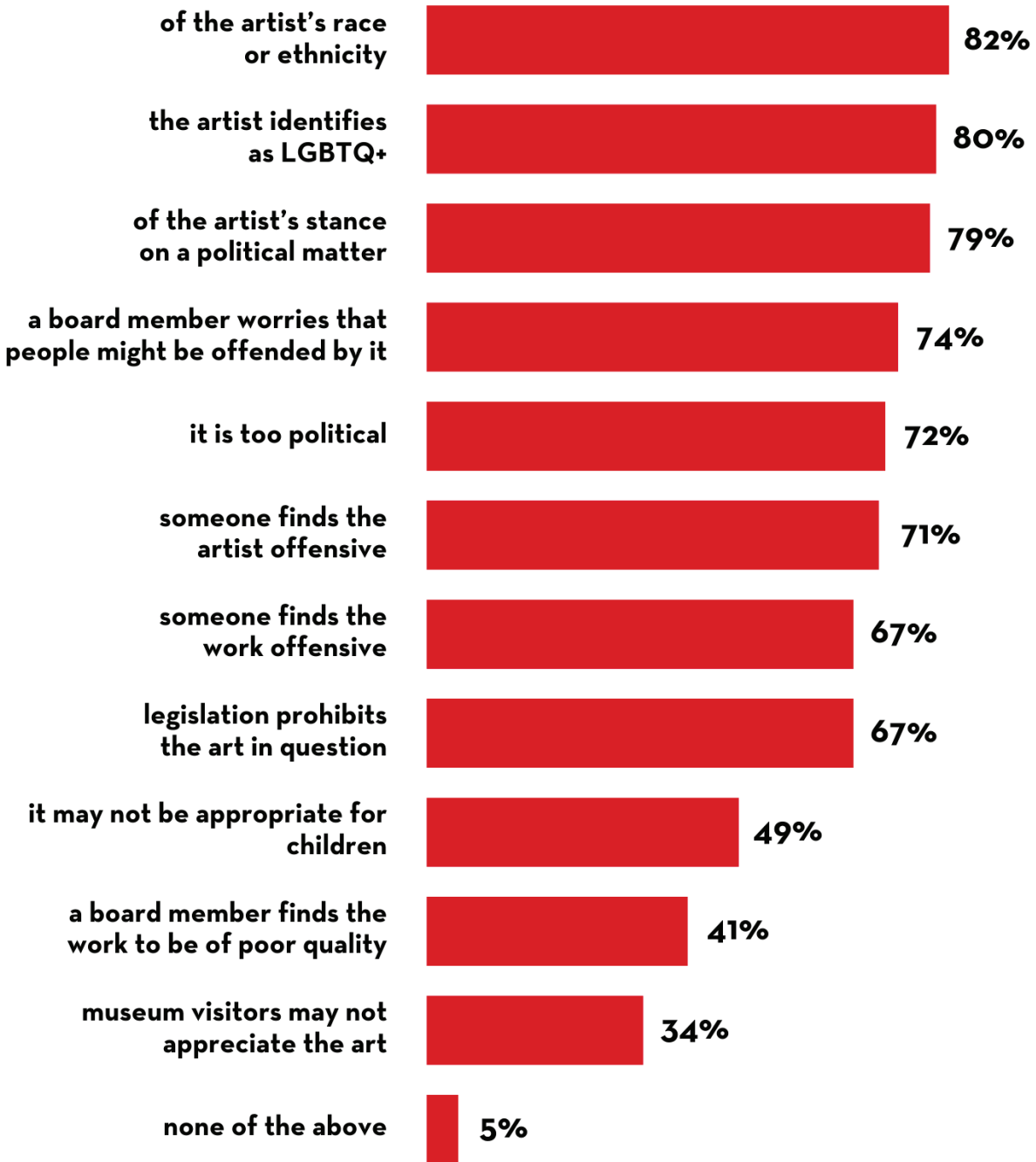
FINDING 1: THERE IS NO CONSENSUS SURROUNDING CENSORSHIP IN ART MUSEUMS

Art museum directors surveyed for this research share common operating principles, but in many ways, their experiences and views with regard to censorship and their institutions vary. Some of these leaders think of their museums as more apolitical, believing that their institutions serve as receptacles for public messaging and the elevation of art or artists, serving an educational purpose but not necessarily engaged in social change. In contrast, other art museum directors think about their institutions as explicitly political, and relate how their institutions are tools to catalyze social change. “We are bold activists!” one director commented, pointing to a rich [history](#) of museums as sites of political discourse and resistance.

The apolitical orientation was much more common among the survey respondents as a whole, and the activist sentiment more of an outlier. Yet nearly all directors expressed concerns about deepening polarization and the threat of censorship for their institutions in some way. Many related that they were in danger of being cast as “politicized” or “dissident” from forces on the right of the political spectrum; some spoke as well about pressures they faced from the political left, especially to conform to what they perceive as orthodoxies about the bounds of acceptable expression. As a group the respondents as a whole tended to feel that even if they tried, it would be difficult for them to remain apolitical in the years ahead, with their work likely to be drawn into and overrun by the culture wars. One director put it rather succinctly, reporting that “it seems that now it is inevitable that we offend someone.”

When it came to articulating specifics, there was similarly broad agreement, though short of total consensus, regarding just *what* constitutes censorship in their museums. Provided a selection of possible scenarios to help elucidate their individual conceptions of “censorship,” more than 80% indicated that if a piece of art was removed because of the artist’s race or ethnicity, or because the artist identified as LGBTQ+, then those would qualify as censorial acts. Meanwhile, over 70% of respondents indicated that if a piece of art were removed because of the artist’s stance on a political matter, or because the work was seen as “too political,” these instances, too, would qualify as censorship. Art removed because of concern about how art or an artist might cause offense, especially if that concern came from a board member, was also broadly indicated to be a form of censorship by just over two-thirds of respondents. A scenario in which art was removed because legislation prohibited it, was viewed similarly.

An example of censorship would be removing or not including an exhibition because...



Data from PEN America/Slover Linett at NORC Survey of AAMD Members.

On the whole, respondents tended to be less confident that other scenarios where art was removed constituted censorship. For example, if art was removed because a board member found it to be of “poor quality,” or because museum visitors “may not appreciate” it, only 41% and 34% of respondents, respectively, indicated this constituted censorship. To be sure, on



none of these points was there universal agreement. Four respondents (5%) indicated that none of the scenarios qualified as censorship at all. Respondents were most divided about a case where art is removed because it “may not be appropriate for children,” with 49% viewing that as a form of censorship, but 51% not.

Some open-ended responses in the survey suggested that the scenarios that related to the “quality” of an art piece were less consistently viewed as forms of censorship because they raised questions about exhibition curation. In other words, such scenarios seemed to be interpreted as part of how museums make art relevant to their intended public, rather than as forms of censorship. In contrast, respondents tended to see art removals caused by an artist’s identity, politics, or the potential for “offense,” as scenarios that were more *ensorial* rather than *curatorial*. We return to this issue with further discussion as part of Finding 4, below.

For each of these questions, respondents’ conceptualization of what actually constitutes ‘censorship’ likely colored their responses. But the key takeaway is that most respondents echoed the sense that they feel caught up in the vitriolic tensions of the current political landscape, and share a belief that pressure to remove or edit exhibitions is either a consistent or a worsening problem in the sector.

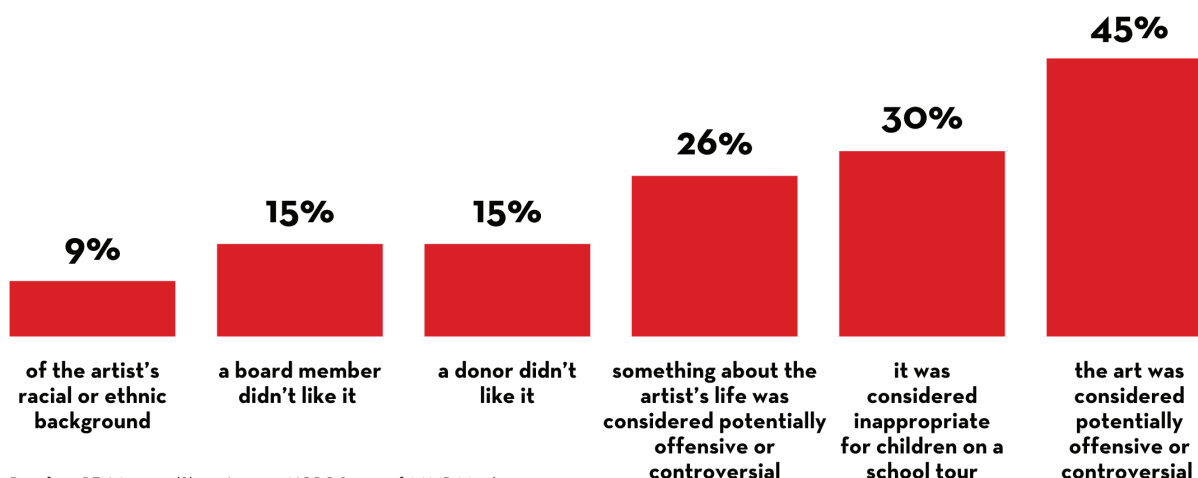
FINDING 2: ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS EXPERIENCE PRESSURES TO CENSOR FROM MANY SOURCES

When asked if they have experienced “pressure not to include an exhibition or piece of art” at one point or another throughout their careers, nearly 65% of respondents in our survey indicated that they had. These pressures have come from a variety of sources for a range of reasons, with complaints originating from museum visitors, donors, board members, and leaders of school groups, among others. Nearly half of the respondents (45%) reported receiving pressure to not publicly display art because it was “considered potentially offensive or controversial” to someone. Some responses were more specific, noting that complaints centered on something about the artists’ life (26%), or on an artist’s racial or ethnic background (9%). Other directors indicated receiving pressures regarding the art for an exhibition from museum board members (15%) or from donors (15%). Meanwhile, for 30% of respondents, they had experienced these pressures related to art that was considered inappropriate for children on a school tour.

What is clear is that for these art museum directors, pressures to censor, remove, or restrict art can be multidirectional. Their institutions can face complaints from visitors over their exhibitions, or the withholding of funds from donors. They can be concerned about government suppression or regulation, or threats of art being defaced.



I have experienced pressure not to include an exhibition or piece of art because...



Data from PEN America/Slover Linett at NORC Survey of AAMD Members.

One respondent, for example, shared a story of dealing with substantial donor pressure, reporting that they “have had several donors in the last 4-5 years tell me that our exhibitions are ‘too woke,’ that we ‘focus too much on social justice,’ etc. One board member complained about our emphasis on access and inclusion, noting that ‘we don’t want people bussed into the city to see our museum.’ The outcome, in the first case, was that those individuals are no longer museum donors (we did not alter our course). As to the board member, we welcomed his resignation from the board.”

Given the timing of the survey in summer 2024, these various dynamics were evident when directors discussed the cultural reverberations of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Here the multifaceted nature of censorship pressures was a common theme: although respondents were generally optimistic about opportunities to show the work of Palestinian and Israeli artists, a significant number related how this was as a new kind of third rail within the arts sector. “The current war in the Middle East has certainly established a need for considering the program as it might relate to or trigger related issues,” one director said. Another said “Currently, we are all struggling to find the right approach to artists who express support for Israel or Palestine in their work. Any such displays will almost certainly become lightning rods for extreme voices on one side or the other.” Others described “considerable pressure” to refuse to exhibit the work of Palestinian artists, especially if it addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One director even mentioned that they were asked not to display works of a certain artist because of previous statements that the artist had made in relation to Gaza, completely separate from the subject matter of her work.

Although these topics arose in relation to the current war, for some directors, tensions surrounding efforts to censor art and artists related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict went back many years. One respondent reported that earlier in their career as a curator they “experienced considerable pressure from donors and some members of the public not to exhibit the work of Palestinian artists, especially if it addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the history of Israel.” Another described how “several years ago we were pressured by one donor not to acquire a work by [a particular artist] because of her political statements about Palestine.”

Museums’ efforts to navigate these tensions can assume extreme dimensions. One respondent described a project for visitor engagement at their museum which involved commissioning a painting “featuring a watermelon, for no other reason than being a piece of fruit on a table.” “Some staff expressed concerns that it represented a pro-Palestinian message and would offend our Jewish donors and visitors,” the director explained, referencing the fact that depictions of [watermelons have become symbols of Palestinian resistance and solidarity](#), in reaction to efforts to censor images of the Palestinian flag. “This same staff wanted the watermelon to be removed. I refused as I did not want to censor the artist,” the director explained. “The artist has no meaning defined of the watermelon other than being just that; a watermelon.”

While the surveyed director stood their ground in this instance and did not remove the piece, there is no guarantee that other directors or staff members would respond similarly. And when directors can face these pressures from many sources – whether concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or any other subject – it poses challenges to their efforts to serve the missions of their institutions and bring art to the public. This issue is particularly vexed for those directors who see virtue in their efforts to remain—or at least remain being perceived as—apolitical institutions, putting art above the political issues of the day.

FINDING 3: PERCEPTIONS OF FUTURE CENSORSHIP THREATS FALL ALONG PARTISAN LINES

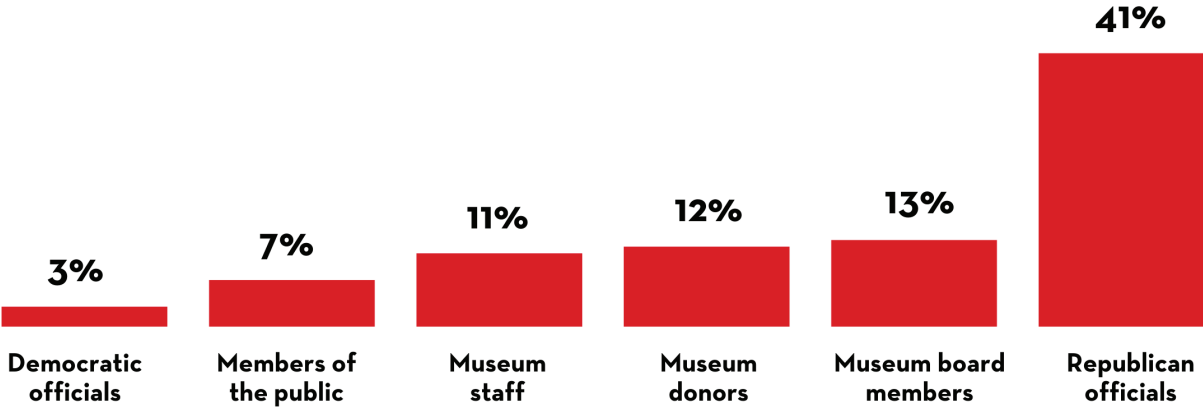
Despite these experiences, when asked if censorship is currently a *problem* for art museums, only 20% of respondents reported a belief that it is “a very big problem.” Nearly 75%, however, indicated that it is at least “somewhat of a problem.” And likewise, it is telling that 55% of respondents indicated that, compared to 10 years ago, censorship is a “much bigger problem for museums today.” In contrast, 0% of respondents reported that censorship is “less of a problem” today than it was a decade ago.

These directors tended to view censorship as a challenge that was worsening, and on the horizon – a future problem. This fear of future censorship seemed to loom larger than actual, tangible experiences with censorship, but it was a recurring theme across the survey – particularly in the perception of threat from Republican politicians.

In answering the question “How concerned are you that your museum will experience censorship in the future because of pressure from the following groups?,” 41.3% expressed strong concern about “Republican officials,” while 3.3% expressed strong concern about “Democratic officials.” Whether or not this forecast is accurate, it is clear that survey respondents felt a greater level of concern about censorship threats from one side of the aisle.

Following “Republican officials,” the next highest group of concern was “museum board members,” who were only a worry for 13.2% of respondents, followed by “members of the public” (11%), and “museum staff” (7%). Each of these was indicated to be more of a perceived future threat than that perceived from Democratic officials.

Percentage of respondents expressing concern about potential censorship from...



Data from PEN America/Slover Linett at NORC Survey of AAMD Members.

While we did not cross-index our survey findings by region, PEN America’s [reporting](#) has found that, time and time again, the nation’s most aggressive book banning proposals appear in the legislation of states with Republican control of both the legislature and executive. This is further borne out by the three aforementioned cases of attempted museum censorship in North Dakota, South Carolina, and West Virginia – all states led by Republican legislative majorities. “We are in a very ‘red’ state in which laws are being



passed which may (likely will) impact future programs,” one director wrote in the survey. “The conversations about the consequences of a specific political party are a part of the conversation now with senior leadership.”

In addition to Republican officials, 46% of respondents responded by selecting “Other” and providing written responses such as “special interest political groups with power” and “partisan influencers with no connection to the museum.” This focus on one political party is not necessarily monolithic. Indeed, one respondent questioned the survey’s seeming focus on legislative censorship. They argued that “the censorship from right and left of the political spectrum is fairly equal, but expressed in different ways. AAMD programs have overwhelmingly focused on governmental censorship, such as via Florida law, but have soft-pedaled the threat of activist-intervention using social media or other means to leverage the museum to draw attention to political causes, albeit in the name of ‘social justice.’ The self-censorship caused by this threat is at least as tangible as that posed by Trumpists—at least here.”

As noted above, there have been a range of incidents of art removals or postponements in museums, including those on college campuses, driven by criticisms or demands from the left of the political spectrum. And museums in general have become a cultural site of protest for progressive causes in recent years. The visual of protesters holding rallies or demonstrations inside of museums is now entwined with our understanding of activist culture in the U.S., whether it is [Just Stop Oil protests](#), groups [like](#) Decolonize This Place, or Opioid Crisis protesters [targeting](#) Sackler-supported wings of art museums such as the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the past year, museums have also been one locale for students and activists [protesting](#) against the war in Gaza.

Yet, few of the surveyed museum directors expressed fear, anxiety, or palpable concern regarding these physical protest movements in response to questions about censorship. Only 11% worried about censorship from “members of the public,” a term that, while potentially encompassing activists, could also indicate the general museum-going public or surrounding community). Additionally, none of the museum directors mentioned protest movements in their qualitative responses, which could indicate one of two things - it could, on the one hand, signify directors are not as concerned with protest movements as they are with legislation and budget-cuts. On the other hand, it could be that they do not see these protests as leading to censorship or self-censorship in a direct manner, associating the terms more with state actions and threats than with cultural pressures emanating from members of the public.

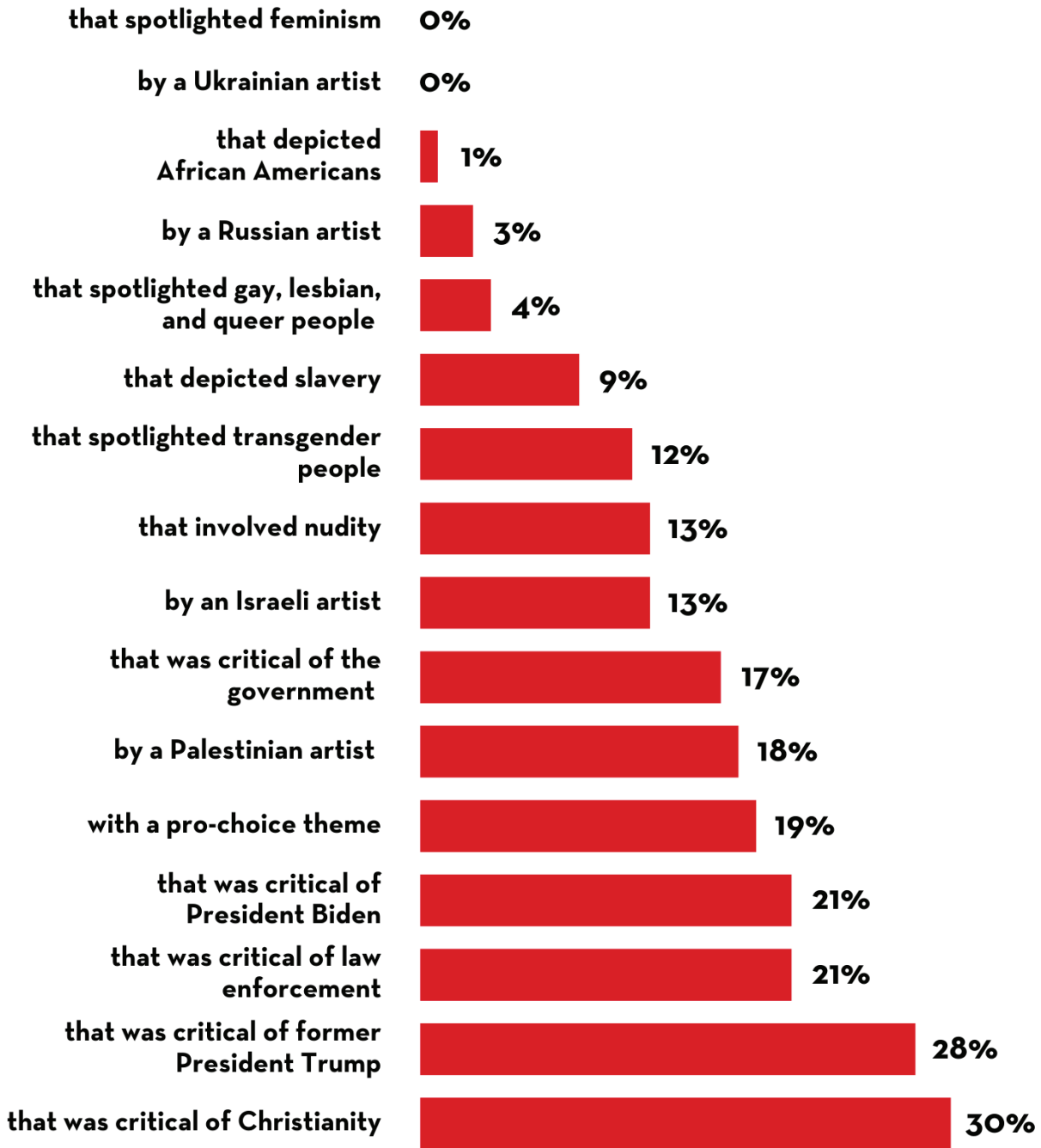
There is perhaps a reason why respondents also anticipated censorship as more of a problem on the horizon than one that they were now facing. As one survey respondent noted, AAMD member museums, unlike libraries and public universities, retain a specific kind of cultural power due to their combination of “affluence and influence.” Given the status and coffers of these institutions, they may be less likely to suffer from threats related to the public purse. There also have not been widespread legislative attempts or public campaigns to censor museums, compared to the efforts to [ban books in K-12 public schools](#) or to censor [certain subjects from college curricula](#). Thus far, only the three bills from 2023 mentioned in this report’s introduction have included museums among their targets.

Nonetheless, as indicated above, more than 40% of survey respondents were worried about government officials as a source of future censorship in some way. While these institutions and their leaders have perhaps been shielded from the increasingly repressive attacks on other institutions of public education and knowledge, many of them seemed to indicate less confidence that this would necessarily remain so in the future.

Relatedly, another survey question asked directors how likely it would be that their museum would receive complaints from the public about an exhibition, depending on a range of potentially controversial topics. In response, 30% indicated that they would anticipate receiving the highest number of complaints regarding any art display that “was critical of Christianity.” This topic was anticipated as likely to garner controversy more commonly than any other, including art critical of former President Trump (28%), President Biden (21%), law enforcement (21%), by a Palestinian artist (18%), by an Israeli artist (13%), or depicting a pro-choice theme (19%).

For these museum directors, Christianity endures as a sensitive subject, particularly when it comes to certain religiously-motivated efforts to censor nudity or sexuality. In fact, in open-end responses, a handful of directors mentioned specifically coming under fire for works that depict nudity or expressions of sexuality, although they seemed to feel that such controversies were not out of the ordinary. This set of survey responses echoes back to the Culture Wars of the 1990s, when conservative groups censured the NEA for funding [artists](#) like Robert Mapplethorpe and [exhibitions](#) including works such as Andres Serrano’s *Diss Christ*, [claiming](#) the NEA was funding “obscene, pornographic or anti-Christian ‘art’ exhibits.” That pressure was successful in [cutting](#) the NEA’s budget at the time – after extensive Congressional debate, the NEA’s [budget allotment](#) dropped from over \$170 million in 1994 to \$99,470,000 in 1996. As the survey responses indicate, it appears that this conflict lingers heavily in the minds of some AAMD members, many of whom have decades of experience in the field.

My museum would definitely receive complaints about an exhibition...



Data from PEN America/Slover Linett at NORC Survey of AAMD Members.

In considering our contemporary political climate, in which art created by or representing trans people and LGBTQ+ issues writ large is [seen by some as anti-Christian](#), the survey results suggest that art that critically comments on expressions of Christianity remains a durable third rail issue for these art museums. In that light, these directors' fear of future



censorship is not so much a new phenomenon as a continuation of longstanding trends and debates in U.S. society. As these issues have played out in schools, libraries, and state legislatures, many of our respondents were anticipating how they could play out in the museum sector in similar ways.

Indeed, justification for such fears recently manifested in Tennessee, where objections by multiple Republican legislators to an exhibition at East Tennessee State University’s Reece Museum forced the temporary closure of the exhibition, and prompted the museum to require viewers of the exhibition to sign a liability waiver beforehand. The objections centered, in part, on whether the art was too critical of some Republican politicians, or whether it was offensive to Christians.

Though the threat of future censorship pressures from forces on the political right was not a focus for *all* respondents, there was broad agreement that threats of censorship in the sector were worsening. With the political dynamics unfolding nationally, these museum directors expected even greater challenges of this nature in the years ahead.

This fear can lead to over-cautiousness. Our survey results demonstrate increasing trepidation concerning political pressure and the threat of state action against the sector. This is leading to some self-censoring behavior amongst museum directors, which we will explore further below.

FINDING 4: MANY DIRECTORS’ DECISIONS FALL IN A “GRAY ZONE” BETWEEN SELF-CENSORSHIP AND CURATION

As mentioned above, one of the key challenges illuminated by this survey is that art museum directors do not have a full consensus about how to define censorship, with some disagreement around how to interpret different scenarios. In fact, due to the curatorial work inherent to the museum field, the question of what qualifies as *curation* and what qualifies as *censorship* or *self-censorship* arose many times in the survey responses.

When it comes to determining what to include in an exhibition, what exhibitions to greenlight, and which to modify or remove from public access, it is clear that art museum directors engage in a range of considerations, and forms of self-censorship can seep into their decision-making. As noted above in Graphic 2, when asked whether they had experienced pressure not to include an artist or exhibition in the past, nearly 65% of respondents responded that they in fact had. Further, the largest number – nearly half – said that the backlash had been because the art might be offensive to someone. The chilling

effect of these pressures for some directors can be ominous; for others, they appear to view such considerations and pressures as part of the work of the curatorial process.

For example, certain museum directors, particularly those who want to appear apolitical or nonpartisan in order to keep their museums afloat amidst bumpy political waters, described preemptive attempts at removing, revising, or recontextualizing artistic material (or artists) that might be deemed offensive or controversial.

One director recounted in their survey response having to “rewrite” exhibition text to be “less confrontational” for the audience. They said that this was not an alteration of content, but an effort to be “more tactful in how the issues are addressed knowing the political leanings of the majority of our audience.”

Said another director, discussing a past curatorial choice: “I self-censored because of the ‘Me Too’ movement and the artist’s past history.”

A third director explicitly denied feeling a need to self-censor, before confessing that they did in fact tailor their tone to the political opinions of their museum’s audience. They noted that they take careful strides to ensure that their museum’s exhibitions “don’t poke the bear.”

Another director declared: “We have a few major prude donors who object to nudity in art.” Subsequently, they shared: “As we are in a major capital campaign, we tend to avoid anything controversial, for the time being.”

All of these stories indicate how directors may draw the line differently regarding what content is too offensive or controversial for their museum to host in different circumstances. Together, they illustrated the complicated decision-making process where a curatorial instinct, the practical demands of running a museum, and the desire to avoid a hostile reaction, all collide. It is in this space that pressures to chill expression in art museums, including through self-censorship, are at risk of advancing, disguised as a more laudable impulse.

Of course, the line between curation and self-censorship can be blurry. But this blurriness does not mean that censorship and curation should be equated. The museum director will always play a curatorial role—it is built into the job description. But it does indicate a space that can be exploited by those wanting to impose censorial preferences on art museums, precisely because of some of this blurriness.

For example, as shown in Graphic 1 above, around 80% of directors agreed that removing a piece of art due to the artist’s race or ethnicity, the artist’s sexuality, or the artist’s stance

on a political matter *would* constitute censorship. And 74% of respondents also agreed that removing art because of a board member’s offense to it would be censorship, too. But conversely, when it comes to taste or aesthetic preference, 59% of respondents did not consider it to be censorship if they remove a work of art that museum goers or board members find to be subpar or low in standards.

Disagreement about where to draw this line was also quite evident when it came to considerations of “appropriateness” of art for children. Interestingly, just over half of respondents believed that it *wouldn’t* qualify as censorship to remove or choose not to stage an exhibition because of such considerations. As one director mused, scenarios surrounding sexually graphic content are often taken case-by-case, and are seen by many as judgment calls rather than censorship, as long as the concern is genuine – regarding a child’s safety rather than a politicized rhetorical tool. After receiving comments from local school district leaders regarding nudity in certain artwork during school field trips, for example, this director decided to “move certain works with nudity to other locations in the same galleries, but on different sight-lines so that they weren’t as visible initially to those entering the galleries as they previously had been.” This choice addressed the perceived issue of appropriateness for children while also keeping the art available for others to enjoy.

Most art museum directors would probably view this as a reasonable compromise; to ensure the art remains accessible, even if an accommodation is made in the location of some pieces. When that impetus is genuine, and when the result is only shifting the locations of some pieces, versus removing them entirely, such curatorial decisions do not necessarily raise significant censorship concerns.

However, day by day, the very idea of what is and is not appropriate for children in public institutions is becoming more politicized, and a more dire form of censorship coursing through K-12 schools and libraries in the U.S. Take the fact that Project 2025 aims to establish a “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” or that it has readily stated that librarians should be treated as “sex criminals” for making “obscene” materials available to view by minors. Or consider Governor Ron DeSantis’s decision to [veto](#) arts funding from the Florida state budget this year, effectively vetoing all of the state’s promised grants to museums and cultural institutions, and justifying his decision with the false claim that the funds were going towards “inappropriate” uses and “[sexual festivals](#).” Unfortunately, what is and is not “appropriate” for children has become the banner behind which politicians across the country have been building their political brand, and they are being used to cloak repressive [policies](#) that affect the arts and culture sector.

As PEN America has repeatedly documented when it comes to book bans, government interference with educational curricula, or even [foreign influence over the content of Hollywood films](#), censorship functions only in part by levying flat prohibitions against certain content. The most effective acts of censorship, instead, seek to redraw the lines that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable content, nudging creators and decision-makers into increasingly cautious stances. If the pressure to self-censor continues to rise in the art world—as some directors fear will be the case, judging by the responses to this survey—it is this curatorial role that censors will seek to leverage.

There is benefit to understanding (and forecasting) these potential issues before the problems manifest more intensively. The results from this survey suggest that for many art museum directors they believe the sector is a crucial juncture, with a chance to put guardrails up before tangible, damaging actions take effect.

FINDING 5: MOST ART MUSEUMS DEAL WITH CENSORSHIP ON AN AD HOC BASIS – BUT WRITTEN POLICIES COULD BE VITAL

In one of the survey's most decisive data outcomes, 90% of respondents stated that their museum did not have a written censorship policy. Of the 10% that did, responses regarding what that policy contained were similarly indicative of a lack of definitional consensus. When asked about the principles in their written policies, these respondents had a range of perspectives, although they are most succinctly summed up by one particular respondent who said, “We don't allow censorship.”

Rarely, however, do there appear to be any efforts to define censorship – what it means, what it has meant, what it *could* mean in the future. In fact, only one director indicated a policy which actually outlines what censorship entails: “The suppression of expressions that some may find objectionable on moral, political, or religious grounds.” This overall lack of formal preparedness is a concern.

We also asked respondents about what they do in these situations. One director shared an example of an experience when they were pressured to reconsider an exhibition that was “considered controversial by Western standards.” They explained that their museum chose to proceed with the exhibition, although they only did so after formalizing the input of an external and internal advisory group, which addressed “the controversial nature head on and allowed staff who found the work offensive to remove themselves from the project.” Another director described an exhibition that certain board members had taken offense with or expressed concern over. Choosing to proceed with the exhibition as planned, the director held a private evening viewing for the board alone, during which a gallery facilitator discussed

the work with the Trustees in a no-holds-barred setting. “Most Trustees emerged feeling empowered to discuss the exhibition without discomfort,” the director wrote, adding that it gave the Trustees “a deeper appreciation of the painting in question.”

Directors in these and other cases shared that they currently respond to censorship threats on a case-by-case basis, and in a reactive fashion. A reactive approach is not necessarily a bad one, but it raises the possibility of being caught flat-footed.

Having a written censorship policy – a document to set out procedures by which an art museum responds to formal or informal challenges, including under what conditions it might take action – is a vital baseline step towards inoculating against encroaching threats. Ultimately, the most important advancement made by a written policy is its ability to identify qualities of censorship in a given situation and to serve as a reference guide of sorts under these circumstances. Perhaps even more than fighting against a case of censorship, it can serve as a protection strategy against it.

This kind of policy is an important fortification measure in defense of free expression, not only against outside forces, but also within the museum’s top-down board structure.

Such policies will look different for every museum based on factors such as its funding sources, governing structure, geographic location, and collection focus. Although it may be impossible to have a written policy for every potential scenario, museums can still prepare to combat censorship with policies that address censorship possibilities that seem feasible within a given museum’s context. These policies might answer questions such as “What happens if a board member objects to an exhibition?” “What happens if the local mayor/state legislature/other relevant politician or political body accuses us of being pornographers?” “What happens if a museum visitor attempts to deface a piece of artwork?” “What happens if the museum receives a sustained protest campaign from an activist pressure group?” Part of these answers should state policies about who has the final say in how the museum will respond to censorship attempts, whether that is the director, the board, or someone else. Answering these questions will be easier if art museums include their own definition of censorship as a baseline for determining whether to use the policy in a given scenario.

It is also worth noting that the very process of establishing, crowd-sourcing perspectives on, and approving a written policy is a way to promote free discourse regarding the issue at hand. These discussions themselves can become a protective measure, a stronger suit of armor and a chance to integrate a more thorough anti-censorship apparatus and consciousness within the museum’s organizational structure from the top down.



CONCLUSION

This survey of AAMD members has suggested that on the issue of censorship in the art museum field today, there is perhaps far more anxiety about the future potential for censorship than a sense that these threats have already manifested as concertedly as they might. This is sobering; but also offers space for optimism. Museum directors have the opportunity to proactively develop written policies that contain ready responses to censorship threats and their chilling effects. As noted above, delineating between the curatorial instinct and self-censorship is by no means always easy. These are inherently subjective assessments. But it is better for museum directors and their staff to do this preparatory work now, amongst themselves, than to have it foisted on them by censorship-minded actors.

One of our key findings is that the specter of legislative censorship is perceived to be located primarily from the political right. But this consensus is not universal. In PEN America's view, and drawing from our educational censorship work, what this may indicate is that the places where museums have the most to fear from legislative censorship is in states with Republican majorities. Even apparently uncontroversial values, like protecting children, can be politicized. Indeed, in these states we have seen more concerted efforts at censorship targeting public schools and libraries, amid rising politicization and partisanship. This underscores the need for museums to be better prepared if state or federal threats emerge from censorship-minded policymakers in the years to come.

Ultimately, art is a vital vessel for social change; but the moment it has to fight for its own right to exist in a public space, the credibility of a society's freedom is eroded. Communities need art to thrive, reflect, and think critically, and artists need spaces to share their voices with the communities that they serve. In our contemporary political era of culture wars-as-political currency, many seem to have forgotten these vital principles and intertwined relationships. The future of the art museum field will stand to benefit from redoubling their commitment to such free expression values, particularly as they may be threatened by shifting political winds and new pressures to censor from numerous directions, in unprecedented ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was written by Jonathan Friedman, PhD, Sy Syms Managing Director, U.S. Free Expression Programs; Daniel Shank Cruz, PhD, Program Coordinator, Free Expression and Education; Hanna Khosravi, Program Manager, Research, and Julie Trébault of Artists at



Risk Connection (ARC). The report was reviewed and edited by James Tager, Director of Research, and Kristen Shahverdian, Program Director, Campus Free Speech, of PEN America. Christine Anagnos, Sascha Freudenheim, and Scott Stulen of AAMD also provided feedback.

We are especially grateful to Barbara-Shae Jackson, PhD, Michelle Ernst, PhD, and Cory Garfin from Slover Linett at NORC for writing, administering, and collating data from the survey of AAMD members, and for their report feedback.

Research for this report was supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

