

# New York's great museums could do better

David Gordon

Revise opening hours, not just ticket prices

Museums like to say they welcome everybody yet they charge for admission and restrict opening days and hours. The biggest and best, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, raised its "recommended" admission price by 25% to a hefty \$25 on 1 July. It was swiftly followed by New York's other leading museum, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which increased its non-voluntary admission price to the same level from 1 September. Both museums are closed for one day a week. Are they setting a bad example?

On admission charges, the answer is no. On opening times, the answer is yes.

At first sight, the New York giants charge more than most. At recent exchange rates, \$25 was the equivalent of €17—70% higher than the €10 charged by the Musée du Louvre and the Museo Nacional del Prado and infinitely more than the free admission to the national museums in London. However, New York museums include special exhibitions in the price of entry, whereas Tate Modern, for example, is charging £15.50 (about \$25, or €18) for its Miró exhibition, and the Louvre €11 (\$16, £10) for temporary exhibitions in the Salle Napoléon. The Prado includes temporary exhibitions for €10, but gives visitors the option of seeing the permanent collection for only €8.

European museums, being mostly state-supported, tend to offer free or inexpensive entry to their collections but differential pricing for exhibitions. This gives visitors a choice, and accords with logic. Exhibitions are expensive one-offs that justify an extra charge.

London and Washington, DC are among the few places with free admission to super-museums. In London, attendances have risen since free admission was introduced in 2003. However, museums have not been fully reimbursed by government for the extra expense of dealing with such large visitor numbers. Extra shop and restaurant income does not cover the extra costs of dealing with the crowds, and people who could afford to pay do not donate an equivalent sum instead. Museums remain admission-rich but cash-poor.

## Leading the charge

Super-museums can afford free or inexpensive admission only with government support. The New York museums get substantial sums from the City but not enough to cover free entry. But do



Value for money? MoMA's general admission price is now \$25

they have to charge so much? It is sensible to charge what the market will bear. The Met had 5.6 million visitors in the year to June, boosted by the brilliant "Savage Beauty: Alexander McQueen" exhibition. Arguably, \$25 is not that much in New York. Those who visit the museum frequently become members and culture tourists are not very price sensitive. The less affluent are likely to be as deterred by \$15 as \$25.

MoMA and the Met get an appreciable slice of their revenue—more than 15%—from admissions, and so need to keep raising the price. Perhaps it would be sensible to do so yearly instead of in occasional big leaps. Perhaps they should experiment with European-style differential pricing for their collections and exhibitions. But what they must do is find a way of catering to those kept out by cost.

MoMA has "Target Free Fridays" from 4pm to 8pm, but judging by the lines outside and the crush inside, this is not enough. The Met has signs by the cash register that say "recommended" price, but this is somewhat disingenuous, since the signs do not go on to explain that people can actually pay what they want—for the very good reason that this loophole would be exploited. Better to follow the Louvre and have free admission to the permanent collection on the first Sunday of every month.

There are free museums in smaller cities, such as the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, and the St Louis Museum of Art, both in Missouri, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Their attendance figures are commensurately higher than comparable museums that charge and they have large enough endowments to make free admission possible. Assuredly New York's museums would go free provided someone would

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give them the money so to do.

While nothing much can be done about price, the same is not true of access. Every Monday, except on public holidays, the Met is closed. On Tuesdays it's MoMA's turn. On Thursday, the Guggenheim. The Whitney Museum of American Art is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, but still argues it needs to move to bigger premises downtown. Encouragingly, MoMA this year experimented with seven-day opening during the

height of the tourist season in July and August.

New York's art museums are in good company. Most other American art museums are closed for at least one day a week, as are most museums around the world: the Prado is closed on Mondays and the Louvre on Tuesdays.

The most basic element of accessibility is to be open for as long as possible, to allow as many people as possible to visit. It is not a law that museums should have a day of rest. Across Central Park, the Natural History Museum of America is open every day, as are the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the National Gallery of Art and all the Smithsonian museums. So too is every major museum in London.

## Where there's a will...

Why does adventurous New York, capital of the art world, fall in with Old Europe's practices?

Two reasons are commonly given. Practicality is the most powerful. Time is needed to move objects around, clean away the marks of sticky fingers and install exhibitions. These are strong considerations. But where there's a will there must be a way. Art museums that do manage to open all week close galleries off when needed or work before and after closing times—Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim spiral could justify an exemption.

Economics is the second reason. The largest department in most museums in terms of numbers is security, and the extra cost of paying unionised guards to work an extra day is judged to outweigh the extra revenue from visitors. No one is going to advocate weaker security but if the high cost of providing it negates other obligations, then it is an issue that needs to be tackled.

One fear is that the number of visitors over six days would be levelled out over seven, so there would be no extra revenue. This argument has more validity in cities with weaker demand for museum-going than New York, whose major museums are bursting at the seams. It is likely that each of them would gain visitors overall if they were all open daily. And if the net result of a longer opening week is that the museum-going experience is simply a less crowded one, then that would be a gain in satisfaction that might be translated into donation dollars.

Art museums tend to be conservative and should do a better job of finding ways of improving access for those who can't afford to pay and of staying open for as long as possible where there is clear demand. ■

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