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Last week the New York Times published two articles on the Metropolitan Opera. The first touted the Met's success in raising a record \$182 million in contributions, and also noted the ways in which the organization has pioneered new audiences for opera through its HD broadcasts into theaters across the country. The second article, by former restaurant critic Sam Sifton, loosely compared dining at one of New York's most expensive restaurants, Per Se, to going to the Opera. If you read the comments on both articles, you can witness a wide range of vitriolic responses - from people declaring that only Wall Streeters go to the Opera, to strong denunciations of the use of public money for rich people's pursuits.

In response, National Public Radio's Classical Music blog, Deceptive Cadence, asked its readers "Is Opera Stuff (only) Rich People Like?" They noted that despite the success of audience outreach, HD broadcasts, and discounted tickets, opera is still perceived as the epitome of cultural elitism. It asked the audience of classic music lovers to tell their story: to tell why they love the opera and to help change the public narrative.

From an arts-interested perspective, the results were outstanding. Sure, there were criticisms of ticket prices and accessibility--but there were also people pointing out the high prices for sports events and rock concerts. The overwhelming response was that opera is for everyone. Opera-goers used their voices via social media to advocate for what they love.

You can see where this is going, can't you? I think there is a lesson to be learned for the museum community, and it makes me wonder if we should be asking the same question of our audiences: "Are Museums only for the Rich?" I know the answer is no, you know the answer is no, but perhaps it is time to ask the broader public for their answer. As a museum community we should engage our audience not only as visitors, but as defenders of something they love.

To do that, our community needs to work a bit harder to overcome decades of resistance to outside voices. While it is obvious that museums have adopted social media tools, there is still too much of a tendency to treat these networks as one-dimensional and uni-directional: more about museums feeding news out to audiences than hearing about (or acting on) those audiences' interests. This is a missed opportunity. Unlike the Metropolitan Opera, it is harder for art museums to take their art and exhibitions and "broadcast" them in a compelling way. This makes it all the more critical to use these 21st century tools to cultivate audiences not just as consumers--attendees, ticket-buyers, etc.--but as passionate devotees.

If we (or NPR!) asked the question "Are Museums only for the Rich?," I don't know what the public response would be. But I know what I hope it would be--and that's what we need to work towards.

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