

Book review

**Shaked N (2022) Museums and Wealth:  
The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections.  
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## **Shaked N (2022) *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections.* London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 978-1-350-04576-7**

Amanda Tobin Ripley

This review focuses on Nizan Shaked's *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections* (2022) and its dissection of the system of philanthrocapitalism in the financing of museum operations. The review asserts the importance of engaging with Shaked's analysis as a means of recognizing the complicity of museum workers with these systems of wealth accumulation. Shaked demonstrates how existing systems of philanthropic giving uphold white supremacy and imperial hegemony by concentrating wealth and decision-making power in the hands of boards of trustees. To enact liberatory museum practices and ethics, therefore, museum workers and activists must also transform funding and governance.

Nizan Shaked's *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections* (2022) is essential reading for anyone and everyone working in and with museums. Her book is especially crucial for those interested in the role of twenty-first-century museums in promoting equity and justice—without engaging with and responding to her analysis, museum workers, leaders, students, and theorists will inadvertently continue undermining all genuine efforts at transformation. In *Museums and Wealth*, Shaked pursues the age-old maxim to 'follow the money,' recentering a historical materialist analysis of U. S. art museums to reveal how the philanthropy model, which 'at its best... can perform some ameliorating triage' (p. 5), in actions and structure works to enrich the already wealthy, perpetuate white supremacy, constrict artistic creation, and threaten equity and democracy via the economic system of philanthrocapitalism.

Throughout the book, Shaked exposes what is essentially insider trading among the philanthropic class, mapping how wealthy board members benefit from their roles on museum boards. She highlights both the financial benefits to collector-board members (increasing the economic value of their personal art collections and wealth) and how these roles also serve political ends: wealthy donors are able to 'art-wash' their reputations, e.g. gaining positive public relations stories through their philanthropic giving which overshadows knowledge of immoral and at times illegal business practices, and gain ideological control of culture and society through an outsized influence on what is exhibited and collected in the name of public heritage. Shaked points out that all of that is not only perfectly legal but is subsidised by government funding (as through the National Endowment for the Arts).

The American nonprofit system, in other words, serves as 'a vehicle for the privatizing of the welfare state and of civil society,' ultimately benefiting only the ultra-wealthy (p. 35). Lest museum workers and thinkers in other countries breathe a sigh of relief for public funding, Shaked also raises the alarm for global institutions that have been gradually shifting towards embracing similar private funding models in recent years.

To arrive at these conclusions, Shaked presents an incisive and clear-eyed account of what and how 'the collection' as a unit of inquiry functions in society and in relation to governance since the widespread financialization of the art market, which she dates to the 1980s. Noting how contemporary collectors have embraced the title of 'modern day Medici,' Shaked examines what that actually means, filling in the gap in the historical development of the museum as an institution between cabinets of curiosity and revolutionary state museums. She devotes an entire chapter to the Medici family, and the critical role that a collection catalogue played in externalizing the private act of collecting towards something that holds public value. It is the daily labor of museum workers in producing every exhibition, catalogue, press release, wall label, public tour, grant proposal, and condition report that provides the validity and authority required to stabilize an artwork's (astronomical) financial value. As Shaked notes with stomach-churning precision: 'This is the brilliance of this system: it forces those who participate in it, whether they accord with it or not, to work in support of wealth and power concentration' (p. 28). Hence the alarm.

Again and again throughout *Museums and Wealth*, it is Shaked's clear and irrefutable prose that eviscerates all well-meaning attempts to serve the public good in and through the museum. As a museum worker, with deep commitments and intentions to advancing equity and justice through my work, reading this book felt like a series of successive punches to the gut. Shaked's analysis demonstrates how such efforts, however well-intentioned, are all surface-level concessions. Reflecting on my education initiatives through this lens—implementing high school tours with explicit justice themes, stewarding community-led programming around an exhibition that challenged the wall at the U. S.-Mexico border, and fostering critical self-reflection on whiteness among part-time educators, for example—reveals how any and all advances towards equity are undercut by the structural funding models, in which '...public money for the arts serves private wealth accumulation and sustains the status quo, which is widely understood today as having been, and continuing to be, white supremacist' (p. 2). Each of Shaked's decisive statements—'If the museum is being instrumentalized to stabilize or boost the status of asset-class and other market art, we have a conflict with the museum's claim to public benefit' (p. 16); 'Significantly, this system serves both a right-wing agenda and a democratic establishment...Those who believe that the system has the capacity to evolve toward more social justice end up fighting harder and harder for less and less' (pp. 34–35); 'When the role of the public is passive we have absolutism, even if tamed and disguised' (p. 150)—is contextualized in well-crafted and expertly reasoned analysis. No number of

radical exhibitions or educational programming can dismantle white supremacy and ideological hegemony while these existing funding structure exists.

There is hope, however. In the final chapter, Shaked offers 'Blueprints for the Future' (p. 151), immediate and actionable policy solutions that assert that '...it is not the role of the publicly subsidized institution to be an agent of inequality by supporting the financial industry' (p. 41) and delineate a pathway out of this mess. She reassures us: 'That we have inherited this system from history does not mean that we have to accept it' (p. 6)—if we can build the political will and collective power necessary to demand these transformations. Shaked refutes the reform-based models that institutions have prioritized in recent years, such as diversifying boards and collection policies, insisting instead on a fundamental and explicitly antiracist restructuring of the financial and economic structure of the arts. As a starting point, Shaked traces various grassroots, BIPOC-, queer-, and women-led efforts to effect change in museums, offering visions of shared governance through peer- and community panels alongside presenting a concrete proposal for a marginal tax on the resale market for art with requisite information transparency, a dual-pronged approach of organizing and legislation that just might begin to shift the balance of power.

Ultimately, however, she acknowledges that the fault lies with the capitalist system itself, which is a larger project than any one institutional board restructuring can attain. Yet it is precisely in museums, she maintains, that we might find a 'proving ground to test the potential and possibilities' of democratic funding based on solidarity and connection over competition and greed (pp. 180–181).

### Author's bio

Amanda Tobin Ripley is a doctoral candidate in Arts Administration, Education, and Policy at The Ohio State University, where she specializes in Museum Education and Administration. Her research focuses on the intersections of the art museum labor movement and grassroots efforts towards social change. Amanda holds an M. Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Arts in Education and a B. A. from Oberlin College in Art History and East Asian Studies. She is a co-researcher on the Art Museum Unions Index from *Museums Moving Forward*, and most recently served as the Associate Director of Education at MASS MoCA, where she was a founding member of the MASS MoCA Union (UAW Local 2110).

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