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Erika Sanger
Executive Director



January 30, 2024

Testimony of the Museum Association of New York
Submitted to the 2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

Dear Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Ryan, Stirpe, Serrano, O'Donnell,
and members of the Senate and Assembly finance committees,

On behalf of the board of directors of the Museum Association of New York, our 750 members of every museum discipline and budget size in every region of our state, and our dedicated staff, I respectfully present this testimony with gratitude for the legislature's steadfast support of New York's museums. In doing so, I also seek your esteemed leadership in addressing three critical areas: 1) **Providing financial support for museums**, 2) **Advancing the results of *The Museum Study Act* to tackle sector challenges**, and 3) **Securing funding for NY250 along with promoting inclusive representation in our cultural narratives**. Your leadership in these areas is pivotal for the continued flourishing of our state's rich cultural history.

Museums are inextricably linked to New York State's identity, economy, and history. Too many operate in a culture of scarcity, struggling to pay bills and wondering each year how they will keep their doors open. Museums need support to protect their collections and historic structures, to strengthen their roles as community education partners chartered by the State Education Department, and to grow their role as economic engines generating more than \$5.37B to the state's economy.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Legislature for your support of **The Museum Study Act**. The report generated by the research will, for the first time in our state's history, give us an accurate picture of our museum sector. It will provide information about the sufficiency of public and private funding sources, inform policy making, and help communities, legislative representatives, and individual supporters learn about the missions, audiences, and funding needs of our state's museums.

When the American Alliance of Museums announced the results of its 2023 survey of the field, MANY received permission to use the same questions to survey New York's museums to see how they are faring in comparison to other museums in our nation.

The good news is that attendance at New York's museums is 25% higher than the national average.

The not such good news is that 43% of New York's museums have yet to recover pre-pandemic attendance numbers and are still averaging 66% of their 2019 attendance. Almost 20% were forced to decrease their budgets in the face of the highest inflation rates of this century. More people visited an art museum, science center, historic house or site, zoo, or aquarium in 2018 than attended a professional sporting event. Museum attendance especially visits by school students, remain far from "before times" numbers.

With COVID relief funds fully expended, cuts to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquaria (ZBGA) and funding to New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) in the Governor's budget dropped to 2019 levels, my fear that the most vulnerable museums would be in danger of financial failure in the wake of the pandemic may likely come to pass. The tragedy we are seeing unfold at MiSci in Schenectady is our canary in the coal mine. With this testimony, I ask you to restore NYSCA and ZBGA funding to 2023 budget levels to ensure that our sector remains a viable contributor to our state's economy.

We need to not only reestablish our staff and our services, but build our capacity to serve our communities. Our museums need consistent, long-term investments to achieve economic stability so that when the next flood, fire, or pandemic hits, one quarter of our museums are not at risk of shutting their doors permanently. We need to change the funding systems to museums to help them address equity, diversity, access, inclusion, and justice and incorporate the work and voices of historically marginalized communities.

In 2026, our nation will mark the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Ten of the original thirteen states along with 25 others have fully seated, active commissions. Our neighboring states have allocated millions of dollars to help ensure that as many voices and stories as possible are represented in the commemorative activities. Connecticut anticipates a \$30M appropriation and New Jersey \$28M. Massachusetts spent \$1.5M to observe the Boston Tea Party's anniversary on December 16, 2023.

New York needs prompt action to promote **NY250** as a priority and allocate funding so that museums, historical societies, historic sites, and historic battlefields can share their cultural resources with their communities and tourists. We must take this opportunity to expand our notions of whose history is worth honoring and equally incorporate the stories of Indigenous Nations, BIPOC, and new Americans to shape a full identity for New York in time for the celebration of our democracy. MANY is grateful to the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, & Asian Legislative Caucus for recognizing this important opportunity and for including \$10M to fund **NY250** in the People's Budget. The gap between interest, intent, and implementation looms large. Legislative action to include funding for **NY250** in this year's budget will ensure that the stories we tell in 2026 are far more inclusive than the stories we told in 1976.

Thank you for your interest, your time, and your support.



Erika Sanger
Executive Director, Museum Association of New York