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# Acknowledging the Colonial Past: Display Methods of Ethnographic Objects

Sarah Kraft  
sarah.kraft14@gmail.com

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**Acknowledging the Colonial Past:**  
**Display Methods of Ethnographic Objects**

Sarah Kraft

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Approved By:



Petra Chu

Thesis Advisor

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## Abstract

Today, the word 'colonialism' brings to mind a dark page in Western history. In the nineteenth century, it was justified as a civilizing mission of the West, aimed at bringing culture, religion, and prosperity to the 'primitive' people of non-Western countries.

Many Western colonizers took objects from colonized peoples, bringing them back, first as curiosities, then as objects of study and wonder to be displayed in ethnographic museums. Ethnographic museums today exist in a post-colonial world, where people recognize that taking these objects in many cases was wrong and, in some cases, criminal. This raises the question of whether museums should return these objects or retain them and, and, in case of the latter option, how museums should display ethnographic objects obtained during the colonial period today? Ethnographic museums, generally, have two options: aesthetic display or contextual display. In this paper, I will discuss both options and make a case for, what I believe, is the better display method for ethnographic objects in a post-colonial world.

## Introduction

### The Museum as a Manifestation of Colonial Success

“How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it... like they took everything else?” This line comes from a scene in the 2018 blockbuster film *Black Panther*. In the scene, a white curator offers a black man information about the objects in the African section of a fictional British museum, seemingly in order to keep a close eye on him while in the galleries. When she incorrectly gives him the origin of an object as Benin, rather than the fictional country of Wakanda, he corrects her and tells her not to worry because he will be taking the object off her hands. When she protests that the object is not for sale, he asks the loaded question stated above, simultaneously referencing Britain’s colonial history and telling her that he is about to steal the object.

This scene made the movie public understand that museums were not, and are not, the paragons of high-mindedness that they are commonly made out to be. *Black Panther* popularized ideas widely discussed for the past twenty years or so in the academic and museum world, ideas that have forced students of museums and museum professionals to take a hard look at museums, especially those containing ethnographic collections, and to acknowledge that many of these objects were not obtained under what we would now consider ethical terms.

Colonialism was the main context for the acquisition of ethnographic collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term is defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as “control by one power over a dependent area or people.”<sup>1</sup> The British Empire is

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<sup>1</sup> “Colonialism,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonialism>, Updated: June 3, 2018. Accessed: June 12, 2018

best known for its colonial practice, as from the eighteenth through the early twentieth century it gained control of much of North America, Africa, Australia, parts of Asia, and South America. However, most Western European countries had colonies overseas, mostly in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Colonialism was driven by the desire for economic success, however, that was not the movement's only driving force. Western people believed themselves to be civilized compared to the primitive people of non-European countries. This belief led to the conviction that the West was called to dominate non-Western countries as it had a duty to enlighten, educate, and advance them. Western empires believed that a civilized nation could rule itself, therefore, if a nation allowed itself to be ruled from afar, as the colonies did, it could not be civilized. Kenneth Pomeranz, a History professor at the University of Chicago, states, "Empire was then justified as tutelage that would eventually make those societies fit either for self-rule or full union within the metropole."<sup>2</sup> This was the civilizing mission, often called 'the white man's burden', that the West believed was upon its shoulders. The term 'white man's burden' was coined by the British poet, Rudyard Kipling, who was born in India, which was then a colony of Britain. He penned a poem on the subject in 1899, applauding the United States decision to colonize the Philippines. The poem's content can be summed up in one stanza: "Take up the White Man's burden -/Send forth the best ye breed--/Go bind your sons to exile/To serve your captives' need; /To wait in heavy harness, /On fluttered folk and wild-- /Your new-caught, sullen peoples, /Half-devil and half-child."<sup>3</sup> Without delving into a critical analysis of Kipling's poem, it is plain that Kipling believed colonialism to be beneficial to the wild and uncivilized people of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, "Empire & civilizing missions, past & present", *Daedalus*, Vol. 134, No. 2 (Spring 2005). Accessed via JSTOR.

<sup>3</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden", <http://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/11whitemanburden.pdf>, Accessed via the Internet Modern History Sourcebook (1997).



the colonized countries. Colonialism was seen as a mission of benevolence and servitude, a mission that Kipling and others believed in wholeheartedly. Of course, to become completely civilized the so-called primitive societies would have to give up their own customs and traditions to embrace those of the West, which were considered superior. The civilizing mission, at its core, was racism in its truest form as it was based on the belief that one race was superior to all other races and that the reason of the discrepancy was the inferior abilities of those other races.<sup>4</sup>

While Western people believed themselves superior to other cultures, they were simultaneously fascinated by them. This fascination coupled with Western pride of colonialism brought about the modern ethnographic museum. Alexandra Sauvage best describes the museum's role in colonialism stating, "European colonialism was not reduced to economic profits; its justifying discourse also forged European identity and culture as "The modern West". The use of the museum as a social tool to promote such cultural identity and values embodies this cultural project."<sup>5</sup> The West's interest in ethnographic objects began with the creation of curiosity cabinets in the homes of wealthy European elites (Figure 1) who, according to Sauvage derived social prestige from collecting objects from far-away lands.

...the European aristocracy developed a taste for the art of collecting objects that would glorify their military career and give them social prestige. Collected objects were "curiosities" because they came from geographically distant territories...cabinets of curiosities mixed hundreds, or thousands of objects, that came to be classified in three sections: naturalia (with animal, vegetal and mineral elements), artificialia (creations of Western man, such as paintings, weapons, astrolabes and telescopes) and exoticas (anything that came from faraway lands, either natural or manufactured, and that was perceived as uncanny or bizarre by the European eye).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Racism," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>, Accessed: June 12, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Sauvage, "To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions", *Culturales* Vol. 6, No. 12 (December 2010). Accessed via SciELO.

<sup>6</sup> Sauvage, December 2010.



Figure 1: Ole Worm's museum, Olaus Worm, *Museum Wormianum seu Historia Rerum Rationiorum* (Leiden, 1655).

Image courtesy of the Wellcome Images, accessed via

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ole\\_Worm#/media/File:Musei\\_Wormiani\\_Historia.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ole_Worm#/media/File:Musei_Wormiani_Historia.jpg),

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>. {{PD-1923}}

In the nineteenth century, the fascination with objects from 'uncivilized' countries developed into a more intense form of consumerism - the international exposition. These expositions often featured whole villages, including hundreds of people, transported from Africa, Asia, and island countries like the Dutch East Indies, a colony of the Netherlands in the nineteenth-century. The exhibition of the 'living village' would transport visitors to another world, one where everything was charming and primitive. Visitors could marvel at the fact that people in these far-away villages did not have the same modern technologies and traditions as the West; they dressed differently (or barely dressed at all), spoke differently, and ate different foods. A well-known example of one of these villages is the Javanese village at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. According to the Field Museum in Chicago, "On the front porches women demonstrated the art of batik, weaving techniques, and embroidery. In the center of the village stood a mosque where the faithful were called to prayer by a large bedung (drum)....Strolling

through the village one heard the melodies of the angklung orchestra (tuned bamboo rattles)...”<sup>7</sup>

The displays of colonized villages emphasized the power and prestige of the colonizing European country, promoting the idea that the ‘uncivilized’ countries were benefitting from the “gift of Western modernity”.<sup>8</sup> With the public success of international expositions and the effects of the Enlightenment through the nineteenth-century, many Western nations decided to create special museums housing ethnographic collections. According to Jos van Beurden, “Each collecting institution or individual had his own mix of motives, varying from the salvage paradigm and scholarly curiosity to greed and disdain...”<sup>9</sup> Many Western ethnographic museums also had anthropological motivations; they wanted to know and understand the history of man. Though ethnographic museums had multiple motivations, the connection between them was the propagation of “overseas rule...and links with colonies and dominions.”<sup>10</sup>

The collections of these ethnographic museums would come from existing cabinets of curiosities, ethnographic expeditions, and missionary travels to non-Western countries. The nineteenth-century was rife with such expeditions undertaken by those enthusiastic to study ‘primitive’ cultures. Edward Burnett Tylor, a well-known British anthropologist and later Keeper and Lecturer at the Pitt Rivers Museum, is an example of one of these collecting anthropologists. He led multiple expeditions to British colonies, amassing a large collection that he later donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum.<sup>11</sup> Other countries formed ethnographic collections through

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<sup>7</sup> “Java Village at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition”, Field Museum, <https://www.fieldmuseum.org/java-village-1893-worlds-columbian-exposition>, 2018. Accessed: June 13, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Sauvage, December 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Jos van Beurden, “Settler and Exploitation Colonialism”, *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects*, Sidestone Press: Leiden (2017), pp. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Nico Bogaart, “Changing assumptions”, “Ethnographic Museums: Principles and Problems”, *Museum*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1983), pp. 145

<sup>11</sup> Chris Wingfield, “IS THE HEART AT HOME? E. B. TYLOR’S COLLECTIONS FROM SOMERSET”, *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, No. 22 (December 2009), pp. 27. Accessed via JSTOR.

expeditions as well, although they were not always necessarily anthropological, as borne out by the expeditions of Franz von Siebold for the Dutch. Siebold was a physician stationed in Deshima, an artificial island and trading post in Japan. Siebold “concentrated on collecting plants, seeds, animals, and all kinds of everyday tools...[he] hired local artists to record images of animals, objects and daily practices on paper and paid three professional hunters to hunt down rare animals.”<sup>12</sup> Siebold’s collection became one of the most important ethnographic collections in the Netherlands, fascinating the Dutch public with unfamiliar specimens, plants, and objects. Both Tylor’s and Siebold’s collections, along with the numerous others similar to these, represent the success of their respective countries in their colonies. These collections became the basis of the ethnographic museums that existed to educate and fascinate the public. In Siebold’s case, the collections were less of a representation of Dutch colonial success, and more a representation of their economic success. The Netherlands and Japan maintained a successful trading relationship, and Siebold collected his objects legally and ethically. His collection demonstrates that not all ethnographic collections were based on colonialism.

Today, museums exist in a post-colonial age, during which colonialism is remembered as a dark period of the West’s history. Recently the question has arisen of how to handle ethnographic museums that owe their existence to colonialism, especially ones whose collections consist mainly of objects that were obtained unethically during their country’s colonization. Currently, a movement exists to decolonize museums in the West, acknowledging the history of colonialism and the museum’s role in the movement. Decolonization of museums, including the return of unethically seized objects and the education of the public concerning colonialism, is, to

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<sup>12</sup> “Siebold”, Japanmuseum SieboldHuis, <https://www.sieboldhuis.org/en/about/siebold>, 2018. Accessed: June 14, 2018.

some degree, an acknowledgement of the colonial past, but it also erases a piece of the objects' histories. Instead, museums need to find ways to change the display of their collections in a manner that will acknowledge the colonial past and reinterpret it, through the objects, for a post-colonial audience.

Acknowledging the colonial framework in which ethnographic museums were established is important in deciding how to display ethnographic objects today. When curators and other museum professionals can acknowledge the reason why and the circumstances under which their museums were established, they can better decide how to display objects from countries that were targeted by colonialism. Within the past thirty years, increased thought has been given to this project. Museums, especially those in Britain, are beginning to acknowledge their colonial past, changing exhibitions and storylines to reflect this, as well as the past of the countries they colonized.<sup>13</sup> However, acknowledging the colonial past of the West begins a debate in museums about display. Moving forward, what is the best way to display ethnographic objects and what stories should the displays tell?

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Small, "Slavery, Colonialism and Museums Representations in Great Britain: Old and New Circuits of Migration," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 9, Iss. 2 Article 10 (2011).

# Chapter 1

## Methods of Display: Aesthetic Appreciation

Once Western museums acknowledge their part in colonialism, they must decide how best to display their ethnographic collections. There have long been two chief options for museums: choose a display focused on aesthetics or choose a display that shows objects in their context. The choice between these methods of display is endlessly debatable, but, no matter, there is a need for the reinterpretation of ethnographic collections that includes colonialism in its explanation of objects' history. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the history and philosophy behind aesthetic displays in ethnographic museums. I will then debate the pros and cons of an aesthetic display for this type of object to decide if this method of display is suitable for ethnographic museums.

Though ethnographic objects had an important place in curiosity cabinets, we know little about their display. Nor do we know much about the way they were appreciated in the time of curiosity collecting. An exception must be made for the ethnographic objects owned by Margaret of Austria. The daughter of Emperor Maximilian, Margaret of Austria was the governor and regent of the Habsburg Netherlands in the early sixteenth century (Figure 2). Owner of one of the earliest curiosity cabinets, ever, she had an extensive ethnographic collection in her palace in Mechelen, Belgium, the so-called Court of Savoy. The collection of Margaret of Austria was especially important thanks to a gift of a major group of ethnographic objects from the New World by Hernando Cortés in 1519. Art historian Deanna MacDonald, on the basis of the collection's inventory, determined that Cortés's gift included: "important ceremonial costumes,

used to impersonate four Aztec gods, that had been given by Montezuma...including silver leg guards, sandals, and a mirror...A silver moon disc and the quincunx Venus disc listed in the inventory are also believed to be from Montezuma. Other items from Cortes's shipment are ceremonial tiger and wolves' heads and, possibly, two elaborate necklaces.”<sup>14</sup> She describes the collection as “a physical manifestation of a concept of universal power.”<sup>15</sup> The objects in Margaret’s collections reinforced the success and power of the Habsburg family both in Europe and in the New World. However, Margaret, apparently, also appreciated the pieces in her collection for their beauty and rarity. In the inventories of Margaret’s objects, similar words were used to describe both the European arts and New World objects in the collection, words such as *beau* and *bien ouvré*.<sup>16</sup> The collection at the Court of Savoy, then, was both a display of rarities and of beautiful objects, which added to the prestige of its owners, at once for these very qualities and for the fact that they hinted at Western power and domination in the Americas. MacDonald states, “In Margaret's lifetime, European attitudes towards the New World had changed from wonder, with a focus on trade and diplomacy, to imperialism, with paternalistic views of domination and subjection.”<sup>17</sup> Margaret’s collection plays well into the discussion of the display of ethnographic objects in today’s museums as it makes us realize that, since the first beginnings of Imperialism in Europe, objects from the non-Western world carried multiple associations ranging from curiosity and admiration to power and domination.

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<sup>14</sup> Deanna MacDonald, “Collecting a New World: The Ethnographic Collections of Margaret of Austria”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vo. 33, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), pp.655.

<sup>15</sup> MacDonald, 2002, pp. 656.

<sup>16</sup> MacDonald, 2002, pp. 662.

<sup>17</sup> MacDonald, 2002, pp. 663.



Figure 2: Anonymous Master, *Diptych with Margaret of Austria Worshipping the Virgin and Child*. Image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, accessed via [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:16th-century\\_unknown\\_painters\\_-\\_Diptych\\_with\\_Margaret\\_of\\_Austria\\_Worshipping\\_-\\_WGA23613.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:16th-century_unknown_painters_-_Diptych_with_Margaret_of_Austria_Worshipping_-_WGA23613.jpg). {{PD-1923}}

We do not know how Margaret's collection was displayed but we do know that the display elicited an aesthetic response. Upon visiting Margaret's collection in the early 1500s, Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, an Italian humanist and historian of the New World, wrote, "I do not know how to describe the panaches, the plumes, the feather fans. If ever artists of this sort were ever ingenious, then these savages certainly are.... In my opinion, I have never seen anything whose beauty can more delight the human eye."<sup>18</sup> In this quote, Martyr's deep appreciation of the objects as well as his attitude of Western superiority can be clearly seen; he calls the native people artists and savages in the same sentence. Based on Martyr's reaction, it is clear that as early as the sixteenth century, ethnographic objects could be considered art while also evoking other associations.

'What is art?' is a tricky question to answer, mostly because definitions change with time. Here I am only concerned with the Western definition, or rather, re-definition, as "art" of

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<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, 2002, pp. 660.



ethnographic objects, which in their cultures of origin were appreciated not as art (a word that in most cultures did not exist, at least not in the modern Western sense) but as objects of practical use or magical power. Anthropologist Maruška Svašek describes this process of re-definition as follows:

When exploring why objects are considered art in a particular period and in a particular social setting, it is crucial to analyze two processes referred to in this book as transit and transition. Transit records the location or movement of objects over time and across social or geographical boundaries, while transition analyzes how the meaning, value, and status of those objects, as well as how people experience them, is changed by that process.”<sup>19</sup>

This was the process ethnographic objects underwent as they came to the West. When objects were brought from the non-Western world to the West, a transition occurred, changing the object from functional or spiritual to a curiosity or an object of interest. It is probably fair to say that, until the twentieth century, most ethnographic objects were considered curiosities or objects of ethnographic interest and study. But by the early twentieth century, as modernist artists like Picasso and Matisse began to visit ethnographic museums to find inspiration in their unusual forms and materials, the objects that were previously considered curiosities were now seen as ‘primitive art.’ It is this new way of looking at ethnographic art that led to the aesthetic display of ethnographic objects. Picasso and Matisse hung African masks on their walls because they were interested in them as ‘art,’ without any thought of the ritual use and function these objects might have had.

The revaluation in the West of ethnographic objects as art, be it ‘primitive,’ eventually led to a rethinking not only of the way in which they were displayed but also of the museums in which they were displayed. The question arose whether all ethnographic objects belonged in

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<sup>19</sup> Maruška Svašek, “Introduction”, *Anthropology, Art, and Cultural Production*, Pluto Press: London (2007), pp. 2.

ethnographic museums or whether some, what were especially well-made, belonged in art museums.

The Michael C. Rockefeller collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) is a prime example of an ethnographic collection placed in an art museum and sharing with the Western objects in the museum an aesthetic display. Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller named the wing for his son, Michael, and the collection consists mainly of African, Oceanic, and American ethnographic objects. Rockefeller's goal with the donation of his collection to the MMA in 1974 was "establishing these traditions as fine arts in the West."<sup>20</sup>

In the early and mid-1900s, Nelson Rockefeller had traveled extensively, collecting objects from Africa, Oceania and the Americas. As a board member at the MMA, Rockefeller was appalled at the lack of indigenous art at the museum; however, the board rejected his efforts to establish a wing for 'primitive art' objects. In 1954, Rockefeller opened the Museum of Indigenous Art (later called the Museum of Primitive Art), consisting of art of non-Western origin. The museum closed in 1974, and the collection was transferred to the MMA, creating the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing. Given their location in an art museum, these ethnographic objects are looked at as art by museum staff and visitors. They are mostly placed in display cases, lit to perfection to highlight their artistic elements. The object labels explain the object's aesthetic elements, as well as their use in many cases. The MMA also does not hesitate to acknowledge colonialism; the main label for each collection gallery references the movement and its effect on the colonized country. For example, entering the Oceanic galleries, the main wall label states, "Western colonialism had a profound impact on the arts of Oceania, causing the decline or

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<sup>20</sup> "The Nelson A. Rockefeller Vision: In Pursuit of the Best in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/nelson-rockefeller>, Updated: 2013/2014. Accessed: June 22, 2018.

disappearance of many traditions. Some of the art forms presented here are no longer practiced.”<sup>21</sup> The acknowledgment of colonialism, as well as the aesthetic display recognizing ethnographic objects as art, makes the MMA a prime example of the success of aesthetic display of ethnographic collections.

Although museums may adopt an aesthetic display method for ethnographic collections, the colonial past cannot be forgotten or overwritten by nicely lit display cases and acknowledgment of the artistic value of these objects. Focusing on their aesthetic qualities, it can be easy to forget the colonial project that brought ethnographic objects to these museums. In *Exhibiting Cultures*, Carol Duncan states, “By exhibiting African art just as Western art is exhibited, museums can encourage respect and admiration, which will in turn increase respect for Africans and people of African descent...”<sup>22</sup> This is a positive effect of the aesthetic display; however, it can elicit negative responses as well, such as accusations of ignoring or overwriting the colonial past. Museums that choose to display their collections in an aesthetic manner will need to find a way to acknowledge their colonial legacy. This may be done through programs highlighting the origins of the collection or through guided tours that discuss how these objects became part of it. Working with people from the previously colonized countries in which the object originate and learning what value these objects have for them is another way to realize an aesthetic display that also acknowledges the colonial past. Aesthetic displays of ethnographic collections that are conceived in collaboration with the objects’ original indigenous ‘owners’ could have a positive effect on both the museum and the public.

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<sup>21</sup> Wall text, “Oceania”, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Duncan, “Chapter 6: Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship”, *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 88-94.

## Chapter 2

### The Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac: A Case Study

According to its website, the Musée du Quai Branly's mission is "to promote the Arts and Civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, at the crossroads of multiple cultural, religious and historical influences."<sup>23</sup> The mission of this museum is incredibly important in shaping its purpose, the scope of its collections, and the public's idea of the institution. This case study will focus on the Musée du Quai Branly (now named the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac) in Paris, and its contribution to the debate regarding the display of non-Western objects. Alan Riding states, "...should objects that were not created as art be presented as art, isolated from their ethnographic context?"<sup>24</sup> This question is directly related to the driving question behind this thesis – how do museums reorganize their collections for a post-colonial era – through aesthetic display or contextual display? The Musée du Quai Branly, with its defined purpose, struggles, and mixed reception in France and around the world, will help to supply the answer, as a case study for the success, or failure, of the aesthetic display of ethnographic collections.

*The New York Times* commented on the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris on page E1 of the June 22, 2006 issue with a pithy headline and this quote: "The museum's goal is simple and ambitious: to treat non-Western art with the same deference that, say, the Louvre gives to Greek, Roman, and Renaissance art and the Musée d'Orsay gives to the

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<sup>23</sup> "Missions and Operations", The Musée du Quai Branly, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/missions-and-operations/the-musee-du-quai-branly/>. Accessed: March 7, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Riding, "Imperialist? Moi? Not the Musée du Quai Branly", *The New York Times*, June 22, 2006, pp. E1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/22/arts/design/22quai.html>. Accessed: March 7, 2018.

Impressionists.”<sup>25</sup> The article is entitled “Imperialist? Moi? Not the Musée du Quai Branly,” an undisguised dig at France’s Imperialist past. In the article, Riding discusses the museum’s inception by the former French president, Jacques Chirac. In his address at the museum’s opening, Chirac admitted that plans began for the museum in 1998, stating, “As the world’s nations mix as never before in history, the need for an original venue was felt, a venue that would do justice to the infinite diversity of cultures and offer a different view of the genius of the peoples and civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas.”<sup>26</sup> There was major contention over the name of the museum, with four different options proposed before its opening. The first suggestion for a name was the Musée des Arts Premiers (Museum of First Arts), however, the term ‘first arts’ was quickly realized to be equated with primitive art, another problematic term.<sup>27</sup> Next, the name Musée de l’Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations (Museum of Man, Arts, and Civilizations) was proposed, but ultimately this idea was rejected when the Musée de l’Homme objected that the name was too similar to their own. After this protestation, Chirac attempted to use simply Musée des Arts et des Civilisations, however, this idea was also rejected on the basis that “combining the terms ‘art’ and ‘civilisation’, two main components of the museum, implied that art was not included in the notion of civilisation.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, Chirac settled on the building’s location of the Quai Branly as a safe option.

The disagreement over the museum’s name was understandable, as the collection is unique and difficult to define in a post-colonial society. The museum’s collection consists of

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<sup>25</sup>Riding, 2006, pp. E1.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Chirac, “OPENING OF THE MUSEE DU QUAI BRANLY SPEECH BY PRESIDENT JACQUES CHIRAC”, Australia Council for the Arts (Nov 12, 2007), <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/speeches/opening-of-the-musee-du-quai-branly-speech-by-president-jacques-chirac/>. Accessed: March 7, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Martin, “Quai Branly Museum and the Aesthetic of Otherness”, *St. Andrews Journal of Art History and Museum Studies*, Vol. 15 (2011), pp. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, 2011, pp. 55.

about 370,000 objects “originating in Africa, the Near East, Asia, Oceania and the Americas...from the Neolithic period (+/-10,000 B.C.) to the 20th century.”<sup>29</sup> The museum’s collection is organized by region, similar to other museums like the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From a brightly lit, winding hallway, visitors enter the galleries displaying the objects (Figure 3). The galleries are dimly lit owing to the fragility of the colors and materials of many of the objects.<sup>30</sup> It is a drastic difference from the bright tunnel to the dark galleries, which seems to have been an aesthetic choice on the part of Jean Nouvel, the building’s architect. The dramatic lighting “presents the works in their own intimacy”, emphasizing their aesthetic qualities.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3: *Masks in the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac*. Aesthetic display in the museum. Image courtesy of The Parisianist Blog via <https://www.parisianist.com/en/attractions/museums/musee-du-quai-branly>.

<sup>29</sup> “History of the Collections”, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/collections/all-collections/history-of-the-collections/>. Accessed: June 23, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Jérôme Bastianelli, ToutParisEnVideo, “Le Musée du Quai Branly Arts premiers Paris (Full HD), filmed December 9, 2012, YouTube video, 7:46. Posted December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMT-8jaWQi0>. Accessed: June 23, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> “An Architecture for a Dream”, Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/public-areas/an-architecture-for-a-dream/>. Accessed: June 25, 2018.

Exploring the Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac is a sensorial and aesthetic experience, due to the lighting and the subtle music, such as drum beats and pan flutes, heard in the galleries. The visitor can appreciate each object for its form and design, and thus, each object is elevated to an art object. At the museum's inception, Nouvel's aesthetic vision gained many critics, who argued that the display method of the collection grew out of the same Western ideology that governed early ethnographic museums, maybe without Nouvel and Chirac even noticing it; this ideology being that non-Western objects are mysterious and represent 'the other'.

Herman Lebovics, a history professor at Stony Brook University in New York, attended the Musée du Quai Branly's opening for museum professionals and academics. He wrote about his experience in a 2006 article entitled "The Musée du Quai Branly: Art? Artifact? Spectacle!" featured in Volume 24, Number 3 of *French Politics, Culture, and Society*. His general perception of the museum was that it evoked Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's famous novel is a commentary on European Imperialism and the civilizing mission, describing Africa in dark, mysterious terms, often referring to the savagery of the native people from the point of view of its colonialist narrator, Marlowe. In his article, Lebovics recounts his experience:

Tunnels usually end in blessed light. On emerging from this one, we were plunged into the yet darker world of the exhibition plateau. Music with a strong drumbeat was playing faintly. I heard it almost subliminally. I did not recognize it, but it was the kind I associate with Tarzan movies. The music and the "primitive" objects vaguely visible from a distance in the obscurity of the hall made me think-and, as I read in the reviews afterwards, made others think-of Joseph Conrad's story of African savagery.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Herman Lebovics, "The Musée du Quai Branly: Art? Artifact? Spectacle!" *French Politics, Culture, and Society* Vol. 24, No. 3 (2006), pp. 97.

Continuing his experience, Lebovics moves on to discuss how information about the objects was conveyed to visitors. He argues that it was difficult to read the small amount of text provided for each object because of the low light. However, the museum provided various videos showing rituals and dances of the peoples represented, giving some context to the objects on display.<sup>33</sup> The museum also provided interactive touch screen monitors where visitors could learn more about certain objects, but Lebovics complains that there were not enough of them, and they were difficult to access when the museum was crowded with visitors. He mentions that the object labels indicated from whom the objects were acquired in the West, for example, 'heirs of André Breton,' but there was no reference to where these people acquired the objects. Thus, Lebovics argues, "we see cultural objects whose history begins only in the West."<sup>34</sup> Although Lebovics' critique of the lack of label information about context and provenance is correct, he does not acknowledge that the museum was built as an homage to the aesthetic display of ethnographic objects. He seems to believe that the objects should be appreciated within more of a context, although what context is unclear. Lebovics concludes that the "Quai Branly has not successfully solved the thorny problem-which, admittedly, may not have an ideal resolution--of how in the West to show the objects collected by conquest, swindle, and purchase during the colonial era."<sup>35</sup> He believes that the Musée du Quai Branly is at risk of becoming a spectacle. Spectacle was not Chirac's intent upon opening the museum in 2006; instead he wished "...to render the depth and complexity of the arts and civilizations of all those continents...to encourage a different - more open and respectful - view in the broadest possible audience, by

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<sup>33</sup> Lebovics, 2006, pp. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Lebovics, 2006, pp. 100.

<sup>35</sup> Lebovics, 2006, pp. 98.



dispelling the mists of ignorance, condescension and arrogance that, in the past, so often bred mistrust, scorn and rejection.”<sup>36</sup>

Lebovics’ article is one of numerous, often mixed, reviews of the Musée du Quai Branly; many academics did not agree with the museum’s attempt to conceptualize their collection for a post-colonial world through aesthetic display, rather than contextual. Octave Debary and Mélanie Roustan discuss the Musée du Quai Branly, its problems, and its successes. They begin their article from Volume 40, Issue 1 of 2017 of *Museum Anthropology* with this statement regarding the Musée du Quai Branly:

The museum’s focus has been perceived as an abandonment of the anthropological project and as a commodification of non-Western cultures, indicating a refusal to contextualize the collections and their history, and through them, the populations involved and the colonialist project itself. From this perspective, the museum places visitors face-to-face with a postcolonial moment in the treatment of so-called others, reducing them to an artistic legitimization and divorcing them from their past.<sup>37</sup>

Debary and Roustan reference an interesting paradox in some Western museums dedicated to objects from colonized countries. There is a tendency in these institutions to erase the West’s colonial past, while at the same time, this past is memorialized through the display of objects from conquered countries. For this article, Debary and Roustan interview, observe, and survey visitors regarding their reactions to the museum, attempting to gain some insight into the debate surrounding the display of objects from colonized countries in a post-colonial world. In discussing their observations, Debary and Roustan come to one important conclusion concerning the architecture of the museum. Rather than create an appealing and aesthetic experience, the architecture, described as a labyrinth by some in the study, seems to disorient and confuse

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<sup>36</sup> Chirac, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Octave Debary and Mélanie Roustan, “A Journey to the Musée du Quai Branly: The Anthropology of a Visit,” *Museum Anthropology* Vol. 40, Issue 1 (2017), pp. 5.

visitors. The article states, “This underlies a visiting method marked by uncertainty—an uncertainty that overrides and even obliterates any questions about the objects: ‘What am I seeing?’”<sup>38</sup> In creating the space for the museum, especially the Plateau des Collections, Nouvel focused on creating a connection to nature mystery, emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of the collection. Nouvel states, “It is a museum built around a collection, where everything is done to evoke emotion around the primitive object. It’s a space marked by symbols of the forest, the river, and obsessions with death and forgetting.”<sup>39</sup> Nouvel’s use of the word primitive is jarring in this statement because the idea behind the Musée du Quai Branly, according to Jacques Chirac’s opening statement, was to reconcile France’s colonialist past with the construction of a museum that would honor the artifacts of their previously colonized countries and countries like them. The use of the word primitive in Nouvel’s statement seems to be a step backward, since primitive is typically used in a derogatory manner, to mean simplistic. Primitive brings to mind the art of Picasso and Gauguin, who introduced the fascination with native people of African and Oceanic countries through their artwork. Interestingly, many of the people surveyed in Debary and Roustan’s article stated that they did “not feel invited to learn through looking at objects.”<sup>40</sup> The Musée du Quai Branly creates an environment where visitors focus more on the experience and the collection than on the context of the objects. Visitors admire the objects in terms of their beauty, elevating them to *objets d’art* rather than objects that once had clear uses in their countries of origin. In their article, Debary and Roustan state perfectly one of the major complaints concerning aesthetic display: “The supposed absence of any artistic aim or intentionality on the part of the creators of certain objects brings up a Western slant on the notion

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<sup>38</sup> Debary and Roustan, 2017, pp. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Debary and Roustan, 2017, pp. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Debary and Roustan, 2017, pp. 10.

of art...<sup>41</sup> The Musée du Quai Branly transposes the Western idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ onto non-Western objects, creating a kind of colonialism in itself. As discussed in Chapter Two, it can be difficult to create an aesthetic display for an ethnographic collection without losing much of the story of the colonial past. The acknowledgment of colonialism is important for a Western museum to succeed in a post-colonial world; it shows the public that they can bring their dark past to light.

Overall, the Musée du Quai Branly has received mixed responses from both public and academic audiences regarding the aesthetic display of the collection. Those mentioned in this chapter agreed that it was an approach that capitalized on the mystery of the ‘other’ and that it felt similar to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* - gloomy, mysterious, and tribal. The consensus by visitors and academics alike is that the display methods highlight the objects as works of art, as objects to be admired. And why shouldn’t we admire them? After all, the West is not the only place to produce great art. However, most ethnographic objects were not created to be art; rather, they were created to serve a purpose within their community. These objects should be admired for their beauty, but they should also be understood and appreciated for their function. As stated earlier, beauty and usefulness are not mutually exclusive. Without context, we cannot know their function, and thus cannot properly admire and appreciate these objects.

In the case of the Musée du Quai Branly, it can be concluded that France’s attempt at reconciliation with its colonialist past missed the mark at first. However, with the recent movement toward decolonization of museums all over the West, the Musée du quai Branly has increasingly expanded its mindset concerning the collection. In the past twelve years since the

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<sup>41</sup> Debary and Roustan, 2017, pp. 10.

museum's opening, it has "risen to the challenge of intercultural dialogue."<sup>42</sup> The museum's temporary exhibitions have embraced difficult topics, such as race and post-colonialism, engendering a change in the museum's focus. In 2016, well-known anthropologist James Clifford conceded, "Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac is clearly a museum that is expanding, rather than abandoning, ethnological perspectives."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> James Clifford, "Quelles perspectives pour les musées au xxième siècle?" September 30, 2016. <https://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/802>. Accessed: June 25, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Clifford, 2016.

## Chapter 3

### Methods of Display: The Object in Context

Ethnographic museums have a second option for the display of their collections, the contextual display. Ethnographic collections can be interpreted within multiple contexts. They can be displayed in the colonial context, as they were during colonialism – as objects of curiosity and study. The objects can be displayed in their original context, with materials (dioramas, mannequins, etc.) demonstrating their original functions and locations, as they still are shown in many museums today. However, I chose to discuss the post-colonial context because it is an apt method of display for our modern society. Today, museums are no longer viewed as neutral, non-political places; in fact, a whole movement titled ‘Museum are not Neutral’, created by Mike Murawski and La Tanya Autry, is based on the politics inherent in museum display and exhibitions.<sup>44</sup> This growing activist movement is a direct result of the acknowledgement of the colonial legacy and attitudes that are only beginning to be dispelled from cultural institutions. Therefore, displaying ethnographic collections in their post-colonial context is increasingly important, for museums as well as the public.

The post-colonial context forces museums to acknowledge their country’s, and their own, participation in the colonial project. It gives museums an opportunity to reinterpret their collection for a post-colonial audience, people who recognize that colonialism deeply and negatively affected the cultures and traditions of non-Western cultures. Regarding the museum’s

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Worts, “Is there another way? – Reflection on Museums, Neutrality, and Activism”, Art Museum Teaching, <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2018/04/11/reflection-on-museums-neutrality/>, Updated: April 11, 2018. Accessed: June 28, 2018.

role in postcolonial society, Stephen Small writes, “Museums are important sites for the contestation of identity and ethnicity, including national and religious identity. They are important sites for contestation over the grand narratives of history, especially nationalist and imperial history.”<sup>45</sup> Redefining the ethnographic collections of a museum in a postcolonial context will lead to new narratives that will be relevant to a newly diverse postcolonial public.

Displaying ethnographic objects in the post-colonial context may, at first, be disagreeable for those museum professionals who believe that the objects should be displayed in their original context. However, the option of displaying an object in its original context is not fully possible in a Western museum. Constance Classen and David Howes point to this dilemma stating, “The sensory values of an artifact, furthermore, do not reside in the artifact alone but in its social use and environmental context. This...is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum.”<sup>46</sup> Museums typically use photographs, films, and even mannequins to place their ethnographic collections within their original context. Often the photographs and films were taken on nineteenth or twentieth-century anthropological expeditions, and depict the native people of the country, often carefully staged, utilizing the object on display, or a similar object. The use of mannequins and dioramas has the same purpose – they typically depict a native person using the object that is on display, such as the Chumash baby and a woman weaving a basket in the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (Figure 4).

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<sup>45</sup> Small, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts”, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, Berg Publishers: New York City (2006), pp. 200.



Figure 4: Chumash baby and woman mannequins demonstrating basket weaving at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Image courtesy of User Jllmo6, Wikipedia via [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa\\_Barbara\\_Museum\\_of\\_Natural\\_History\\_-\\_Chumash\\_diorama.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa_Barbara_Museum_of_Natural_History_-_Chumash_diorama.JPG).

The display is an attempt to recreate the environment in which the objects would have been used in daily life. However, the painted background seems stagnant and phony, and this, combined with the static mannequins, does not help to contextualize the objects or the culture. The Chumash people are passionate about environmental issues as their ancestors subsisted on the land, utilizing plants, animals, and other parts of nature to survive. However, there is no indication of the environment's importance to the Chumash people in the museum's display. There are several thousand Chumash descendants living in the California area today; in fact, the descendants have recreated a functioning Chumash village in the tribe's original location.<sup>47</sup> To better display their Chumash objects, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History could work with the existing Chumash people in order to reinterpret their collection in a post-colonial

<sup>47</sup> "Wishtoyo's Chumash Village", Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation, <http://www.wishtoyo.org/chumash-village-1/>, Accessed: June 28, 2018.

context, rather than attempting to show the objects in Western-created frozen artificial context. The post-colonial context would feature Chumash objects as they are used within the community today, demonstrating that while many of the traditions are the same, these objects are used in a different manner today. It would also emphasize the importance of the environment to the Chumash, maybe even featuring material from protests the Chumash have attended in support of the environment, including the protest of the widely covered Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) in 2016.<sup>48</sup> The post-colonial context should focus on the effects of colonialism, which would be referenced in this example by the issue of the DAPL, as well as how the group is functioning today. It is crucial that museums with ethnographic collections work with existing members or descendants of the group whose objects they are displaying. These people can give museums valuable insights into certain aspects of their culture, allowing museums to exhibit cultural material in a respectful and engaging manner. Most museum professionals today would agree that the standard contextual display is not adequate in a postcolonial world in which ethnographic museums must become sites for conversations about the colonial legacy.

Displaying ethnographic objects in their original context also fails to recognize the problematics of displays of non-Western culture created by Western ethnographers. For example, many non-Western cultures are much more multi-sensory than Western culture, which privileges sight. Many ethnographic objects need to be experienced through touch or smell.<sup>49</sup> However, museums do not allow for that option, as touching is not typically encouraged unless it is done with educational, low-value objects. Classen and Howes discuss an idea that has existed in

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<sup>48</sup> Mati Waiya and Alicia Cordero, “Wishtoyo Responds to Call to Action to Halt Construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline Threatening Critical Water Resources, Native Sovereignty, and Protection of Sacred Sites”, Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation,

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5459dd35e4b0eb18b9b5599b/t/57d1d9175016e1b624d6df64/1473370391373/Wishtoyo+Foundation+Press+Release+Sept+6+2016.pdf>. Updated: September 7, 2016. Accessed: July 24, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Classen and Howes, 2006, pp. 206.



Western museums since the nineteenth-century stating, “The visual emphasis of the museum contributed to the model of colonization in several ways. Artifacts were required to conform to the sensory order of their new home. This meant being reduced to the visual, or – from a Western perspective – being civilized into the visual.”<sup>50</sup> Classen and Howes use the example of Navajo sand paintings to underscore their point (Figure 5). The aesthetically pleasing paintings were created by shamans to channel healing power; however, the West has always appreciated them for their visual, not their healing abilities which came from rubbing the sand into patients’ skin. Classen and Howes describe the paintings’ creation and use:

The shaman covers the floor of a ceremonial house or *hogan* with dry sand and sprinkles colored pigments on top to create an image of the cosmos. He sings as he works, calling the deities to inhabit their representations in the sand. When the painting is complete and vibrant with divine energy the patient enters and sits at the center. The shaman transfers the positive energy of the painting to the patient by rubbing sand from different parts of the picture on to the patient’s body. After the ritual is finished the painting is swept away.<sup>51</sup>

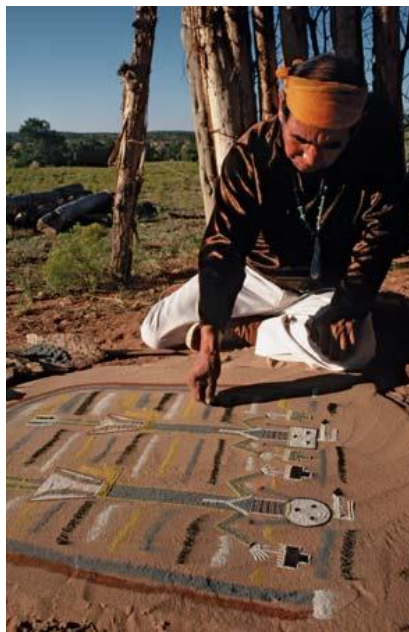


Figure 5: A Navajo man creates a traditional sand painting. It will be swept away at sundown. Image courtesy of Ted Spiegel/Corbis and Britannica via <https://kids.britannica.com/students/assembly/view/137229>.

<sup>50</sup> Classen and Howes, 2006, pp. 210.

<sup>51</sup> Classen and Howes, 2006, pp. 214.

Sand paintings were never meant to last or to be appreciated for their beauty. Today, they hang in museums, displayed in the improper position (they are supposed to be on the ground) and context. A better solution for museums that wish to educate the public on traditional Navajo sand paintings would be to have an existing Navajo group recreate a sand painting as a public program. While most Navajo likely do not believe in the power of sand paintings in the current day, the program would be an opportunity for them to share their rich culture and traditions with the public.

In 1988, Athia L. Hardt wrote about a sand painting demonstration at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. She states, “Because he is simply demonstrating his art and not taking part in a healing ceremony, he makes his sand paintings with a deviation -such as transposing colors or eliminating a figure - so as not to offend the deities.”<sup>52</sup> In this manner, the museum shows a post-colonial interpretation of the tradition, since it is not being shown in the original context of the healing ceremony, but in a more current context. Then the public will learn about Navajo traditions through the eyes of an existing member of a non-Western group, rather than through the (typically) Western eyes of a museum curator. Continuing to display objects in their original context, without allowing them to exist truly within their original context, will make ethnographic museums obsolete in the present post-colonial world.

The post-colonial display of ethnographic objects encourages dialogue between cultures, as well as depicts an honest representation of a dark page in Western history. The post-colonial context focuses on facilitating conversations, between the objects themselves and between the viewer and the object. While not necessarily a post-colonial example, this facilitation is apparent

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<sup>52</sup> Athia L. Hardt, “The Art of Navajo Sand Paintings”, *The New York Times*, October 2, 1988 Issue, pp. 5005014. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/02/travel/the-art-of-navajo-sand-paintings.html>. Accessed via The Times Machine Archive Viewer on July 13, 2018.

in Fred Wilson's 1992 installation at the Maryland Historical Society. The installation was titled *Mining the Museum*; Wilson used objects from the museum's storage to complement objects that were on display. The objects that Wilson chose from storage were objects that represented the history of slavery, as well as the oppression of Native Americans, in the West – shackles, whips, a Ku Klux Klan mask, and others. He placed these objects with pieces on display that emphasized the glory of colonial America, such as silverwork and furniture. These objects represent a dark part of slavery that is often not displayed by museums for fear of appearing too political. Wilson “was pressuring the idea of a master narrative, and challenging the museum's role as a nominally objective arbiter.”<sup>53</sup>

An ethnographic museum could very easily create a similar display with items from the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and items that celebrate the Belgian wealth gained from colonialism, for example. In fact, the Africa Museum in Belgium is reopening in December of 2018, after renovating and reinterpreting its collection. The museum was opened by King Leopold III in 1897, as “a propaganda tool for his colonial project, aimed at attracting investors and winning over the Belgian population.”<sup>54</sup> Now, the museum aims to shed more light on the dark and violent colonial past of the Belgian Congo. A gilded statue of a missionary holding an African child stands at the entrance to the museum; its plaque reads ‘Belgium brings civilization to Congo’ (Figure 6). This clear manifestation of colonialism will remain on view, but with an explanation of why it was created. Guido Gryseels, the museum's

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<sup>53</sup> Kerr Houston, “How Mining the Museum Changed the Art World”, BMoreArt, <http://www.bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html>. Updated: May 3, 2017. Accessed: June 29, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> “Museum History”, Africa Museum, <http://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history>. Accessed: July 13, 2018.

director, states, “We hope to bring that new story, that new narrative, in our museum.”<sup>55</sup> Gryseels acknowledges the colonial past of Belgium, and the role the Africa Museum played in the movement. Reinterpreting their collection will facilitate discussions among the public, much like Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* did. This post-colonial interpretation of objects brings to light the idea that much of the wealth in the West came from the success of colonization in non-Western countries. It also begins a dialogue between objects in the museum’s existing collection, as well as a dialogue between visitors.

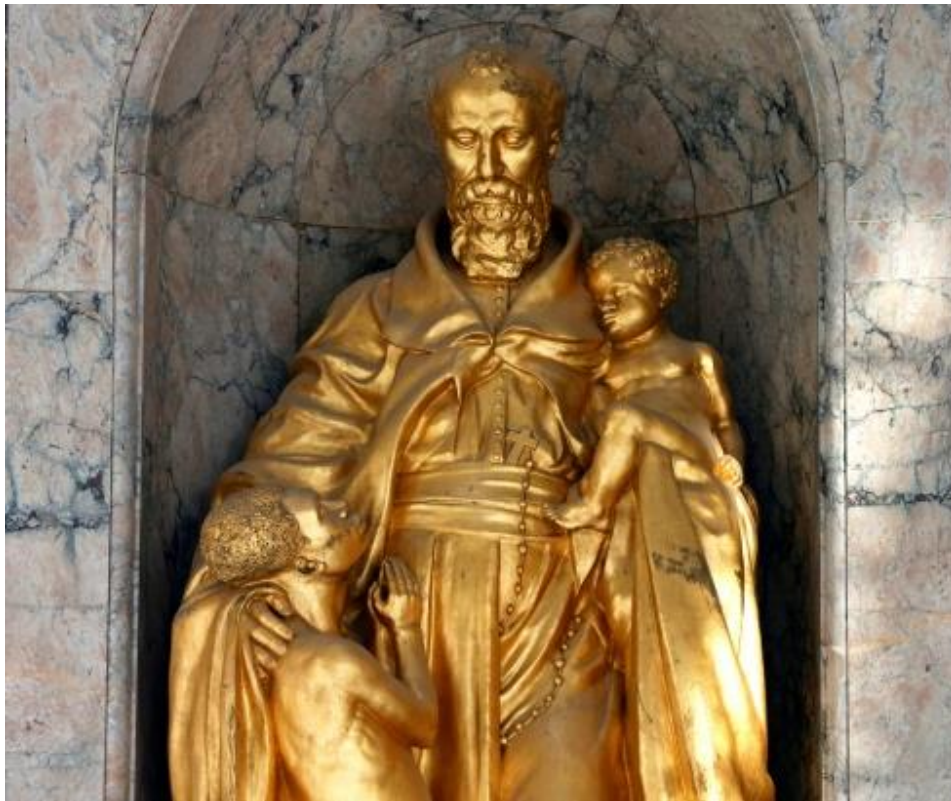


Figure 6: Arsène Matton, *Belgium Brings Civilization to the Congo*, 1910-1922. This statue stands in the entrance rotunda of the Africa Museum in Belgium. It has two sister statues, *Belgium Brings Security to the Congo* and *Belgium Brings Prosperity to the Congo*. Image courtesy of Francois Lenoir, 2014, via <https://omgnews.today/king-leopolds-ghost-belgiums-africa-museum-reopen/>, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>.

<sup>55</sup> Reuters Staff, “King Leopold's ghost: Belgium's Africa museum to reopen”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belgium-museum-africa/king-leopolds-ghost-belgiums-africa-museum-to-reopen-idUSKCN1IX53V>. Updated: June 1, 2018. Accessed: July 13, 2018.

Displaying ethnographic objects within the post-colonial context is also important for the people descended from the previously colonized places. This method of display gives them a chance to interact with their history on a more personal level, the way that Western people can every day in museums. Nana Oforiatta Ayim, a Ghanaian writer and historian, states, "...you have the African galleries, and it's like, 'This drum is from 1500 Ashanti,' but there is nothing else about it. You don't know what it is used for, what context it's from, how it was brought here, who stole it. The museum as it exists today is so much an imperialist project and is so much about power."<sup>56</sup> Reinterpreting ethnographic collections would give museums an opportunity to more thoroughly explain and acknowledge how and from whom their ethnographic collections were obtained. Instead of simply giving the title of the object, as Ayim mentions above, labels would state the title, when, where and from whom an object was taken. This acknowledgment of colonialism in post-colonial museums could engage a more diverse museum audience. People who may not have visited museums before because of their tendency to white-wash history would more likely be interested in visiting a museum that acknowledges colonialism and is working to reinterpret its collection. The post-colonial museum is a political place; its displays are meant to incite conversation and debate among visitors. The collections need to be displayed in their post-colonial context for this purpose to succeed in modern Western museums.

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<sup>56</sup> Alex Frank, "Nana Oforiatta Ayim's Open-Source Encyclopedia of African History Starts With Ghana", *Vogue Online*, October 20, 2017, 12:00 PM. <https://www.vogue.com/article/ghana-africa-art-cultural-encyclopedia>. Accessed: June 29, 2018.

## Chapter 4

### Museum Volkenkunde: A Case Study

“Museum Volkenkunde – the National Museum of Ethnology – is a museum about people.”<sup>57</sup> This assertion greets visitors to the Museum Volkenkunde’s website. The museum’s current collection consists of over three hundred and forty thousand ethnographic objects, photographs, drawings, and other materials. The museum’s mission is “to inspire an open attitude to the world and to help shape a global community.”<sup>58</sup> It defines itself as a museum about people and universal themes. This mission itself is the paragon of a post-colonial museum – changing the focus of the museum on the people who created the objects, rather than exclusively focusing on the objects. The Volkenkunde relays the stories of cultures from around the world, acknowledging colonialism and their role in it.

The Volkenkunde Museum was founded in 1859, making it one of the world’s earliest public ethnographic museums.<sup>59</sup> Its foundational collections are those of Franz von Siebold, Jan Cock Blomhoff, and Johannes Gerhard Frederik van Overmeer Fischer, all of whom were stationed at Deshima (the artificial Dutch trading island off the coast of Japan, mentioned earlier in this paper), which allowed them access to collect everyday Japanese objects. Blomhoff’s collection of Japanese artifacts was purchased by King William I in 1826 for the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, and it was later distributed to the Volkenkunde in Leiden and the Rijksmuseum in

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<sup>57</sup> “About Volkenkunde”, Museum Volkenkunde, <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en/about-volkenkunde>. Accessed: June 29, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> “Mission”, Museum Volkenkunde, <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en/about-volkenkunde/mission>. Accessed: July 3, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Jan Schmidt, “CHAPTER 8: LEIDEN, MUSEUM VOLKENKUNDE (MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY)”, *Catalogue of Turkish Manuscripts in the Library of Leiden University and Other Collections in the Netherlands*, Leiden University Library: Leiden (2012), pp. 100.

Amsterdam.<sup>60</sup> The Dutch king also purchased Fischer's collection, later giving it to the Volkenkunde in Leiden when the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities was dissolved. These objects became the foundation of the Volkenkunde's collection, establishing it as a museum representational of Dutch success in trade and colonization. The Volkenkunde's collections "were largely assembled through the pursuit of science, trade or religious missions – all inflected with a Dutch colonial ethos...."<sup>61</sup> As in most Western museums, these objects were relegated to the realm of curiosities, until the early 2000s, when the Volkenkunde decided to undergo a decolonization effort. In 2014, the Volkenkunde merged with the Tropenmuseum and the Africa Museum to form the National Museum of World Cultures, sharing one collective mission: "to help foster and preserve an open-minded view of the world."<sup>62</sup>

In 2006, the Volkenkunde released its annual report, which included profiles of each collection in the museum. In these profiles, the museum described each collection by region, i.e. South and Central Americas, Africa, China, etc. The museum acknowledges the role of the Dutch in colonialism in the description of each region the country colonized. In the profile of Central and South America, the museum states, "The Museum of Ethnology was well-positioned to acquire objects from the Dutch colonies in the New World. The collection from those areas was expansive but also reflects the one-sidedness of colonial thinking at the time. People sought 'curiosities' from the country. Only some aspects of life there were brought to attention."<sup>63</sup> Similar acknowledgments are echoed in the profiles of other regions, showing that the museum

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<sup>60</sup> Brill Publishing, "Dutch Trade in Asia, Part 2: Papers of Jan Cock Blomhoff: Short Biography", <https://brill.com/view/title/20089>. Updated: January 1, 2011. Accessed: July 9, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Nakamura and Rita Ouedraogo, "Care and Dis/repair", Research Center for Material Culture, <http://materialculture.nl/en/care-and-disrepair>. Updated: 2017-2020. Accessed: July 9, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> "National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden", Asia-Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS), <http://asemus.museum/museum/museum-volkenkunde/>. Updated: 2017. Accessed: July 10, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Museum Volkenkunde, "Central and South Americas", *Museum Volkenkunde Annual Report 2006*, 2006, pp. 14

has been aware of and actively discussing colonialism's effect on museums. These profiles are a clear indication of the Volkenkunde's post-colonial conceptualization of its role. The museum recognizes that the Dutch had an advantage in the collection of items from certain regions because of the colonies or missions they established. The museum then attempts to contextualize the objects from the stated region, including the acknowledgment of the colonial past. The contextualization of these objects is achieved through the inclusion of descendants or members of the represented colonies; however, the museum also should acknowledge parts of the previously colonized culture that may have disappeared as a result of colonialism. The civilizing mission of colonialism overrode many traditions of the colonized people, enforcing Western traditions instead. The Volkenkunde shows this aspect of colonialism through the display of their objects as well as the use of photographs and videos of current day regions that were previously colonies, where the influence of Western traditions can still be seen in the people's clothing and other aspects of their lives. Museums must also recognize this part of colonialism as part of the post-colonial reinterpretation of their collections.

The Volkenkunde has reinterpreted their collection for a post-colonial age, changing the ways in which their objects are displayed. In the permanent galleries, they have made use of photographs and videos from both past colonial expeditions and current daily life in each region. The use of these photographs and videos, especially the current ones, place the objects on display in the post-colonial context, allowing visitors to understand their use and significance to each culture represented both in the past and in the present. The museum's mission, which emphasizes that the museum is about the people, not just the objects, undergirds the use of these supplemental materials. The use of photos and videos from the current era puts faces to the name of a culture; essentially, they allow people in the West to comprehend that these groups exist.



The Volkenkunde has also made a visible effort to include current members and descendants of non-Western groups in displaying ethnographic objects and demonstrating their use. One example is the Maori waka that sits in the water next to the museum (Figure 7). In the past, the museum has hosted a Maori weekend, during which local Maori sail the waka and demonstrate different aspects of their culture.<sup>64</sup> Inside the museum, a case displaying ceremonial dress shows visitors how the pieces are meant to be worn, using two tracings of a male and a female placed on the glass case, with the pieces displayed within the case lined up with where they would be worn on the body. This information was given to the museum in consultation with the group who originally owned the ceremonial costumes. The museum acknowledges the importance of the input of the people to whom their objects originally belonged in order to display their collection in the post-colonial context.



Figure 7: Te Hono ki Aotearoa waka taua crewed by Toi Māori kaihoe (paddlers) during the waka handover ceremony in Leiden, Holland. Image courtesy of Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed via <https://mch.govt.nz/news-events/news/waka-celebrations-waitangi>, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nz/legalcode>.

<sup>64</sup> “Maori Weekend”, Museum Volkenkunde, <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/activiteiten/maori-weekend>. Accessed: July 3, 2018.

Finally, the museum's temporary exhibitions also reflect a move towards the post-colonial context in the display of objects. The recent exhibition "Jewelry: Made By, Worn By", is an example of this type of display. The exhibition featured jewelry from all over the world, mixing historic and contemporary pieces. The main idea of the exhibition was the universality of the creation and use of jewelry. The museum's website states, "People's need to adorn themselves is universal and as old as humanity itself."<sup>65</sup> Exploring jewelry as a universal theme places all groups of humanity as equals sharing in a common tradition. Equality in the recognition of the importance of the art of all groups of people is an important part of a post-colonial museum. Assistant curator Vanessa de Gruijter stated, "We want to show that differences between techniques and materials globally are often minimal. Distinguishing between Western and non-Western creativity is antiquated."<sup>66</sup> For this reason, the objects in the exhibition were categorized by material, rather than by geographic region. However, Saskia Kolff-van Es argues that "reducing so many pieces of jewelry...to a choice of material does not do any of them justice. Material and technique are essential for jewelry to exist, but the story is not complete until jewelry comes to life acting in the relationships between people."<sup>67</sup> As in the permanent displays, the exhibition featured both old and new videos and photographs of people from around the world wearing and creating jewelry, as well as explaining its importance in their daily lives.

The emphasis on the post-colonial context and dialogue between cultures makes the Volkenkunde a strong example of a museum that has successfully utilized a contextual display. Its permanent collection, as well as temporary exhibitions, reinforce the museum's mission as a

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<sup>65</sup> "Jewelry: Made By, Worn By", Museum Volkenkunde, <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en/node/457/exhibitions/jewellery-made-worn>. Accessed: July 5, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Saskia Kolff-van Es, "Jewelry: Made By, Worn By: All Cultures Make Beads, Are All People Thus Connected?", Art Jewelry Forum, <https://artjewelryforum.org/jewellery-made-by-worn-by>. Updated: March 25, 2018. Accessed: July 10, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Kolff-van Es, March 2018.

post-colonial museum, fostering relationships between cultures and focusing on the people, rather than exclusively on the objects. This is also represented in the museums educational programs, which include discussions on decolonization and programs like the Maori weekend, which used contributions from local Maori people. The Volkenkunde provides concrete evidence that the contextual display of ethnographic objects works for museum collections in the post-colonial era.

## Conclusion

### The Future of Ethnographic Museums

In the post-colonial age, will ethnographic museums become obsolete? I think this is unlikely. However, museums do need to reinterpret their collections for an audience more concerned with politics and empathy for all cultures. This reinterpretation should include the contextual display of ethnographic objects, since the aesthetic display is no longer suitable for a post-colonial world. Pieter ter Keurs states, “The new type of museum has to play an active role in the modern world, all the while keeping in mind our historic roots. Museums are at once ‘things of the past’ and ‘things of the future’.”<sup>68</sup> The idea of the post-colonial contextual display acknowledges the colonial past, while also looking to the future of Western museums. Many European museums have already undertaken decolonization efforts, including repatriation and reinterpretation of objects in their collection. In the United States, museums have begun to include mentions of the country’s history of slavery and oppression in their exhibitions and collections. The actions of said museums are a movement towards the building of a post-colonial museum. Jesmael Mataga and Farai Mudododzi Chabata best describe the importance of ethnographic collections in the post-colonial era in their article “The Power of Objects: Colonial Museum Collections and Changing Contexts” written for *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*. They state:

Though museum ‘ethnographic’ objects collected in the colonial era have been separated from the cultural, religious and political contexts from which they originate, in the postcolonial museum, the objects presumably retain a level of potency. A potency to rise up and influence discussion and acquire several other patinas of value which are now at a

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<sup>68</sup> Pieter ter Keurs, “Things of the Past? Museums and Ethnographic Objects”, *Journal des africanistes* Volume 69, Issue 1 (1999), pp. 79-80.

larger scale and range from the personal, to the ethnic, the religious, the nationalistic and the transnational.<sup>69</sup>

Ethnographic collections are still relevant in today's world; they are simply relevant in a different manner than before. Instead of being relegated to the realm of curiosity, or even to the realm of art, ethnographic objects today have the ability to begin discussions among museum visitors, as well as honestly tell the story of the West's colonial past. This ability of these objects can only be realized when they are displayed in a contextual manner. The objects displayed possess rich histories that should be communicated to the public, and utilizing the proper display method allows them to be fully understood and appreciated.

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<sup>69</sup> Jesmael Mataga and Farai Mudododzi Chabata, "The Power of Objects: Colonial Museum Collections and Changing Contexts", *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, Volume 4, Issue 2 (2012), pp. 92.

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