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Representations of Indigenous Cultures in Today's Museums and

Impacts on Cultural Tourists

Rachel Perkins

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There has long been a troubled history of relations between museums and the minority groups that they profess to represent. The 1984 exhibition “Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Jones 1993, 204-205) is a textbook example of good intent gone awry in the art world. This exhibition shows the dangers curators face when attempting to put together an exhibition without consulting those whose culture they are trying to exemplify. One major critique of the “Primitivism” exhibition was its failure to contextualize the art it was displaying, an oversight which art critic Thomas McEvilley called “an act of appropriation...[an example of how the] Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really coopting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority” (as cited in Jones 1993, 204-205). Other museums also display a lack of depth in their presentation of the “other;” two significant examples of this being the former Rockefeller Museum of Primitive Art and exhibitions such as “African Aesthetics” at the Center for African Art (Jones 1993, 206). This paper aims to examine the ways in which museums display the cultural other—particularly local indigenous groups—in their exhibitions, the pitfalls of these attempts at representation, and how this impacts the museum-going tourist’s experience.

Sites that more adeptly avoid the pitfalls to be laid out in this paper are more likely to encourage tourist attendance, whereas those that misrepresent and take advantage of indigenous communities mislead the tourist and therefore discourage visits. On the other hand, museums that have an indigenous-driven process provide the tourist with the sense that they have experienced something authentic, and they will likely come away with a more nuanced understanding of a potentially previously-unknown group of people. Additionally, the

indigenous perspective will serve to differentiate the museum from other tourist sites, and as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “To compete for tourists, a location must become a destination. To compete with each other, destinations must be distinguishable” (1998, 152). Therefore, a museum that is created through an indigenous-driven process, with indigenous representation as the foremost concern, will benefit not only the community it represents, but the tourists as well. An indigenous-driven design process can serve to differentiate museums from other tourist sites which are potentially less concerned with representation.

Critiques of the 1988 exhibition “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples” at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, further illustrate how museums can fall short in their efforts to showcase indigenous cultures. This exhibition was sponsored in part by Shell Oil, a company that, at the time the exhibit opened, was drilling oil wells on land seized from the Lubicon Lake Cree Indian Nation by the Canadian government—who also happened to sponsor the show. After the Lubicon called for a boycott of the museum, Canadian museums as a whole were forced to confront native reactions to museum practices. This led to greater dialogue between indigenous communities and museums and to a more thorough critique of standard museum practices. According to Anna Jones in “Exploding Canons: The Anthropology of Museums,” these shortcomings include “the neglect of contemporary Indian artists, the failure to consult local native communities, the display of objects collected under suspicious circumstances, the distorted historical treatment, the use of the ‘culture area’ concept, and in particular, the curator’s ignorance of contemporary political issues” (1993, 209). Other cases, which will be discussed later in this paper, demonstrate how different museums are able to address these and similar critiques.

The Anchorage Museum is a contemporary example of how curators can address the concerns outlined above. From its conceptualization, the Anchorage Museum was meant to reference the surrounding natural settings and indigenous communities. In a 2009 architectural review, Brian Charter describes the museum as “inspired by light and lightness.” The main sources of this inspiration, according to Charter, are the preciousness of daylight at such northern latitudes, which is why the building is designed to let in as much light as possible, and the “intrinsic sense of lightness rooted in economy” found in many of the museum’s artifacts—from the lightweight structures of kayaks and shelters to the “gossamer-like translucent coverings” of garments made from sea lion intestines (2009). The architect’s design choice to draw his inspiration from indigenous artifacts was the first indication that the museum had local indigenous communities in mind. Judging by the current exhibitions at the museum, there is still a clear interest in looking at and representing local groups. The Anchorage Museum’s list of current exhibits includes “Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska,” “Art of the North,” “Branding Anchorage,” “Alaskan Exhibition,” “Cruisin’ the Fossil Coastline,” “Ephemeral State,” “Neighbors: Portraits by John Raymond Mireles,” “David Pettibone: Year with a Tree,” “The Art of Fandom,” “Points of View: Perseverance,” “Terra Installation,” and “Northern Life: Roots of Change” (2017). Of these twelve exhibits, five of them—Living Our Culture, Alaskan Exhibition, Art of the North, Branding Anchorage, and Points of View—mention Native Alaskans in their online description and/or include work by native artists. Of the seven that don’t, two—Northern Life and Neighbors—are collections of photographs which include pictures featuring Native Alaskans, in addition to other, non-indigenous subject matter. The remaining exhibitions fall into the categories of science—

Cruisin' the Fossil Coastline and Ephemeral State, appreciation of nature—Year with a Tree and Terra Installation, and pop culture—The Art of Fandom. The mixture of indigenous and non-indigenous subject matter in these exhibitions demonstrates the efforts made by the Anchorage Museum to represent Native Alaskans in a complex fashion. Although the “Living Our Cultures” and “Point of View” exhibits are solely focused on indigenous culture and artifacts, the other exhibits which include works by Native Alaskan artists present them in the same fashion as other works by non-indigenous artists. In this way the museum is showing that it equally values the works of indigenous and non-indigenous artists.

I analyzed the information made available on the Anchorage Museum's website, which includes a written description of the exhibits and photographs of some of the items on display, in order to determine (as much as possible without viewing the exhibits in person) the amount of consideration for indigenous communities that went into the museum. A more detailed breakdown of these exhibits illuminates some further points of interest regarding the extent of the museum's consideration for indigenous communities. The museum's website specifically addresses a longstanding flaw in many museums in its description of “Art of the North”—“Museums have long segregated indigenous artwork from other traditional, modern and contemporary works. With this installation, the two will be combined into one narrative of the North” (2017). Going through the museum's website, it is clear that the curators had this idea in mind while designing the current collection of exhibits. Based on my evaluation, the Anchorage Museum adequately contextualizes the pieces in its collection and includes indigenous and non-indigenous art in the same exhibitions, thereby demonstrating the equal value given to both categories of artists/artworks.

One final point of interest regarding the Anchorage Museum is the origin of its displays. The majority of the 600 indigenous Alaskan artifacts in the “Living Our Cultures” exhibit are on loan from the Smithsonian Institution. The museum’s website claims that this loan is “the first arrangement of its kind...allowing access for hand-on study by Alaska Native elders, artists and scholars” (2017). Although this loan is a significant effort on the part of both museums, the donation of these artifacts to the Anchorage Museum is not equivalent to the repatriation of the items to the communities from which they were taken, which would be a more sincere show of support for Native Alaskan communities. At the very least the artifacts are in Alaska, but they have not been truly returned to their communities of origin.

One way to avoid many of the pitfalls associated with representing indigenous cultures, even those seen in a museum such as the Anchorage Museum that is seemingly doing everything right, is to place the museum fully in the hands of the local indigenous communities. This is frequently seen in Oaxaca, Mexico, where many towns have a community museum of their own. These museums serve several functions: 1) They provide a venue for tourists to experience “Oaxaca’s archaeological, artisanal, and cultural richness;” 2) They serve as a repository for local archaeological finds, allowing these objects to remain in the communities where they were found; 3) They give community members a way to “construct and transmit their identities through the choice of themes important to the communities” (Hoobler 2006, 443); 4) Entrance fees to the museum can provide a source of revenue. However, this last function is only a minor factor, since in many cases the employees are volunteers and the entrance fees go almost entirely toward maintenance of the facilities (ibid., 449).

The effect these community museums have on domestic versus foreign tourists is very different. For domestic tourists, these museums can build pride in the visitor's cultural identity and inform them about their history. For foreign tourists, these museums also serve to educate and cultivate interest in the history of the area they are visiting. The response of foreign tourists in the cases of community museums can also serve to affirm pride in the community's sense of identity. "The townspeople may have always put great value in these things but have avoided showing them to outsiders. Having visitors respond favorably has been an affirmation of the traditions and their importance" (Hoobler 2006, 443-444). Migrant workers, those who were born in Oaxaca and have family there but are currently working elsewhere, fall at an interesting intersection between foreign and domestic tourist. For these individuals, visiting community museums serves to renew their ties to their home communities (ibid., 444).

The average community museum is dedicated to two themes. The majority of museums in Oaxaca have chosen archaeology as their primary theme, and the secondary theme is usually dedicated to some cultural aspect important to community members. This secondary aspect can be anything from the Mexican Revolution to folk art to saints' festivals (Hoobler 2006, 443). By their very nature, community museums avoid many of the pitfalls of state-owned museums. Since the museums are all curated around themes important to the local community, contemporary indigenous artists are rarely, if ever, passed over in favor of foreign artists. For example, the community museums at Santa Ana and Teotitlán both chose textiles as their secondary theme. Since the two communities are rivals, both with a rich tradition of weaving colorful rugs, they each chose to showcase the work of their own weavers at their community museums as a point of pride (ibid., 454), a quintessential example of how the work of



contemporary indigenous artists may be successfully displayed in community museums. The display of these locally produced rugs can provide additional opportunities for financial gain to the artists. Teotitlán rugs are sold throughout Oaxaca and are often sought after by tourists. Santa Ana's textiles, on the other hand, do not have the same prestige (*ibid.*, 453-454). Hoobler does not comment on whether the display of rugs in community museums increases sales of the textiles, but I would hypothesize that the museums would increase interest in and valuation of the rugs by foreign visitors, leading to additional income for the community on top of museum admission.

Similarly, community museums aren't in danger of failing to consult local Native communities, since they are run by these communities. When the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) initially tried to set up community museums in other parts of Mexico, its attempts were met with failure. "Since the museums were set up and run by outsiders... the community members [felt] that their culture had been appropriated" (Hoobler 2006, 448). Community museums experienced greater success when they were run by locals, because the locals feel that they are being more accurately represented.

Finally, the acquisition of artifacts by community museums is actually a much less dubious process than if the same items were to end up elsewhere. Before the widespread establishment of community museums, the common practice was to send archaeological finds from small towns in Oaxaca to Mexico City. Many of these artifacts, which held important cultural and historic value to the indigenous inhabitants of the area, were seldom returned (Hoobler 2006, 450). Community museums changed all that. They allowed communities to assume control of the stewardship of their archaeological treasures, as opposed to shipping

them away to a far-off national institution. Some community museums have even been able to repatriate items that were once out of their grasp, as is the case with the community members from San José del Mogote who traveled to Oaxaca City to reclaim artifacts that were being kept in a museum there on “temporary exhibition”. Additionally, with the benefits of having archaeological finds displayed in community museums, community members who find artifacts are more likely to report the finds to INAH and donate them to the community museum, as opposed to selling them (*ibid.*, 451).

Cultural centers in the Pacific Northwest, such as the Kwagiulth Museum and Center and the U’mistá Cultural Center, serve similar functions to Oaxaca’s community museums. However, James Clifford, in his analysis of these two cultural centers, argues that neither venue was fully capable of telling “the whole or essential story about Northwest Coast Indian artistic or cultural productions” (Clifford 1999, 110). This runs contrary to the ideas of Hoobler’s article, which suggests that community museums are the key to accurate representation of indigenous cultures. However, the main difference between Oaxaca’s community museums and these cultural centers is that Oaxaca’s residents have made the decision to build their own museums, whereas the cultural centers resulted from efforts to repatriate objects illegally confiscated by the Canadian government in 1922. Rather than returning these items to the families from which they were taken, the decision was made by the Canadian government to place them in a museum (*ibid.*, 154). Whereas the community museums were the result of indigenous agency, the cultural centers were put in place by the government.

In regard to these factors’ impact on tourism, I hypothesize that the more adept a museum is at avoiding the pitfalls laid out in this paper, the more likely tourists are to attend

their exhibitions, have a positive experience there, and acquire valuable knowledge from the experience. According to Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert in “Gazing from home: Cultural tourism and art museums” there are eight filters through which a tourist views an art museum. These filters serve as motivation for tourists to attend or avoid museums both at home and abroad. Stylianou-Lambert calls these filters “professional, art-loving, self-exploration, cultural tourism, social visitation, romantic, rejection, and indifference” (2010). I believe that these filters, aside from art-loving, can be applied to any type of museum. Since in Stylianou-Lambert’s study the rejection and indifference filters didn’t result in any museum visits, I am not going to include them in my further discussion of the taxonomy. That leaves professional, self-exploration, cultural tourism, social visitation, and romantic motivations. The professional motivation is influenced by whether someone works in the museum industry for their career. In such instances, career is often a motivator for museum visits. Self-exploration in this instance can come in two forms; the first stemming from a desire to learn about oneself through exhibitions about one’s culture or history, and the second being motivated by a desire to learn about oneself through a comparison with exhibitions focused on the other. Stylianou-Lambert defines the cultural tourism filter as traveling with the main goal of “exploring and learning about other cultures” (2010). He argues that even on trips where tourists engage in cultural tourism activities, cultural tourism is rarely the primary goal of the trip. Social visitation involves visiting a certain tourist site because others in one’s group wish to do so, not due to any personal desire to go. Tourists using a romantic filter attend museums because they have an idealized perception of museum attendance.

Of the five types of museum goers, the professional is probably the least likely to be affected by the pitfalls outlined in this essay. Even if the general public is boycotting an exhibition, as was the case with “The Spirit Sings,” a professional is still going to visit museums as a component of their job. However, it is possible that if the professional is in some way troubled by the museum’s practices—if the museum received sponsorship from an oil company that was drilling on indigenous lands, for example, or was in possession of artifacts that were unscrupulously acquired—that might tarnish their overall experience at the museum. Other tourists are perhaps more likely to avoid a museum surrounded by such scandal altogether. I believe that the romantic and cultural tourist in particular would be dissuaded from attending such a museum; the romantic because such scandals ruin the idealized vision of the museum, and the cultural tourists because they are supposedly interested in engaging with other cultures and are therefore more likely to be aware of the political and cultural implications of such a scandal. Whether or not a socially motivated tourist would attend a museum in this case depends on the category of tourist their peers fall into. And finally, the tourist motivated by self-exploration may or may not visit, depending on their personal moral code.

Without the burden of knowing that a museum is appropriating indigenous culture or in some other way misrepresenting the people it purports to represent, all of these categories of tourists are more likely to enjoy their visit to a museum. Other factors that could add to a visitor’s enjoyment of the museum include the authenticity ascribed to the contents by the tourist. As tenuous a concept as authenticity is, I am inclined to use the definition proposed by Erve Chambers in his book, *Native Tours: The Anthropology of Travel and Tourism*. Chambers suggests that authenticity results from the agency of the group: if a group decides that they are

authentic then they should be viewed as such by outside players (Chambers 2010, 5, 110). The best way to ensure the authenticity of an exhibit is to engage in dialogue with the communities being represented, which appears to be the case for the current exhibitions at the Anchorage Museum. Better yet, museums should allow for self-representation as is the case with the community museums in Oaxaca, Mexico.

The professional, self-exploratory and culturally motivated tourists are most likely to benefit from the acquisition of knowledge as part of their museum experience. The reason that collaboration with indigenous communities is important in this instance is because without such collaboration, the information being dispensed at museums runs the risk of being misrepresentative or down right false. The best way to avoid this is through continual dialogue with indigenous peoples at every level of exhibit-making, from the curators to the artists to the docents.

The results of such collaboration between museums and indigenous communities benefit everyone involved. The museum is able to display a more authentic product, and visitors will find their practices less objectionable. Indigenous communities will be able to decide how they are presented to the world, and hopefully monetary benefits from the museum will reach the community as a result of its increased appeal to tourists. In this way, the tourists will have a more authentic experience and come away with a clearer idea of the culture on display than they would have gained had there been no indigenous-driven process for representation in the museum.

## Epilogue:

### A Reflection on the Lightcatcher's People of the Sea and Cedar Exhibition

Since I was unable to attend any of the exhibitions or museums discussed in my paper, I wanted to take the ideas I have laid out and apply them to an exhibition to which I had access. To that end, I toured the People of the Sea and Cedar exhibition at the Lightcatcher, an extension of the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington. The People of the Sea and Cedar contains a blend of archeological artifacts and works by contemporary native artists, which it uses to build a narrative of the Northwest Coast people. I visited the exhibition on two occasions; the first visit was as part of an Anthropology of Museums class, and the exhibition viewing was followed by a question-and-answer session with Victoria Blackwell, the Director of Exhibitions for the Whatcom Museum. My second visit, several months later, included a tour led by Bill James, the hereditary chief of the Lummi Nation and an experienced carver whose work is on display in the exhibition. In addition to gaining knowledge of the exhibition through attendance, I received personal insights from Victoria Blackwell, who agreed to answer a series of interview questions via email to give her perspective on the exhibition design process. Both of these visits provided a different perspective on the creation of the People of the Sea and Cedar exhibition, and the interview with Victoria Blackwell clarified many of the ideas she alluded to during my first visit to the Lightcatcher.

Following my first visit, I was overwhelmingly impressed with the work Victoria Blackwell had done and the efforts she had gone through to represent the interests of the Lummi and Nooksack Nations to the best of her ability. She walked the Anthropology of

Museums class through the multi-month process of establishing a working relationship between the museum and members of the Lummi and Nooksack Nations (with more success on the part of the Lummi; she is still working on nurturing the museum's relations with the Nooksack). She emphasized the importance of having initial contact with each tribe through an intermediary, the intermediaries for the Lummi Nation being local carver Scott Jensen and Lummi language instructor Matt Warbus. Given the tumultuous history between museums and indigenous peoples, initiating this contact can often be met with suspicion on the part of the indigenous communities. Trust must be gained and built upon, and that often means running many of the design decisions for an exhibition through a committee of tribal elders and accepting their input, even if that decision is to veto an idea from the curator. For example, at the request of Lummi tribal elders, the Whatcom Museum decided not to display masks used in religious ceremonies in their exhibitions out of respect for the spiritual significance of such items.

In admiration of the extent of the collaboration between the Whatcom Museum and the Lummi in particular, I got caught up in the idea that the Lightcatcher's exhibit was a perfect example of collaboration between a museum and an indigenous community, but the insight I gained from my second tour of the Lightcatcher added a new layer of perspective to my initial experience. In addition to attending a tour guided by Bill James, I was fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the collaborative process between the Whatcom Museum staff and representatives of the Lummi Nation. Both Victoria Blackwell and Bill James indicated their desire to depict the history of the Lummi and Nooksack as an ever-evolving story. As Victoria Blackwell said, "[the Lummi and Nooksack are] telling the story, the museum is just the

recorder.” In the interest of accurately representing a group of people, it is not the job of the museum to direct the narrative being told, but to allow those being represented in the museum the agency to tell their own story.

In my initial analysis I emphasized the importance of an “indigenous driven design process,” but failed to consider the fact that the design process for an exhibition, even a permanent installation such as the People of the Sea and Cedar, could and should be an ongoing series of collaboration between museums and indigenous communities. Additionally, in looking at the People of the Sea and Cedar exhibition I was overeager to approve of the degree of collaboration as I perceived it, but hearing Bill James speak, in particular hearing his observation that the exhibition as it currently exists has more of an archeological tilt than he would like, has reinforced the importance of gaining an indigenous perspective even after the initial design has been approved. Looking at the exhibits through an academic lens, I saw a modicum of representation and collaboration and deemed that to be enough; hearing the perspective of Bill James reinforced the importance of gaining a second opinion because it showed me how different things can look from our two different perspectives, even if we share the same interest.

My overwhelming approval of the People of the Sea and Cedar following my first visit to the Lightcatcher demonstrates a trap that many museum faculty members are in danger of falling into. I had become so caught up in my own interpretation of the exhibition that I had seen what I wanted to see—a perfect example of collaboration between museums and indigenous communities, as opposed to what was actual there—an unfinished product which is part of a longer and on-going collaborative process. This realization above all else proves to me



why it is so important for museums to engage with the communities being represented in their exhibitions: even with the best of intentions, it is astonishingly easy to become complacent and deem any degree of representation beyond the bare minimum as sufficient. This is why museums should always make an effort to be in communication with at least one representative of the communities being displayed in their exhibitions, someone who will give them the extra push necessary to ensure that representation is not just a token or gesture, but a priority of the museum staff.

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