

From Nature to Culture; the “other” at two New York Museums
Da natureza para a cultura; o "outro" em dois museus de New York

Solmaz Mohammadzadeh Kive

Como citar:

MOHAMMADZADEH KIVE, S. Nature and culture across Central Park; the “other” at two American museums. *MODOS. Revista de História da Arte*. Campinas, v. 3, n. 3, p.116-133, set. 2019. Disponível em: <<https://www.publonline.iar.unicamp.br/index.php/mod/article/view/4234>>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24978/mod.v3i3.4234>.

Imagem: Prominence of objects from different continents/courtiers in exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, data collected in 2016.

From Nature to Culture; the “other” at two New York Museums

Da natureza para a cultura; o "outro" em dois museus de New York

Solmaz Mohammadzadeh Kive*

Abstract

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the distinction between art and ethnographic object has been a decisive factor in determining the nature of an exhibition and the approach to its objects. Following the systematic classification of the mid-nineteenth century, non-Western objects were often placed in the ethnographic displays of natural history and anthropology museums. Around the same time, some “artifacts” from Asia were classified as decorative arts. In the twentieth century, they migrated to art museums and formed “Islamic art”, “Asian art”, “primitive art”, and similar collections. In the late-twentieth century, anthropology museums and ethnographic displays received many criticisms for their representations of other cultures. In the past few decades, many museums have addressed the issue in various ways. One of the most common approaches is based on recategorizing the former ethnographic objects and presenting them as artworks. Yet, the effectiveness of this approach is subject to many debates. This paper discusses some differences between ethnographic/anthropological and art historical exhibitions in two prominent museums in New York City, the American Natural History Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in order to explore some similarities that underline these two seemingly opposite poles.

Keywords

Other. Ethnographic display. Art museum. Digital humanities.

Resumo

Desde meados do século XIX, a distinção entre arte e objeto etnográfico tem sido um fator decisivo na determinação da natureza de uma exposição e da abordagem de seus objetos. Seguindo a classificação sistemática de meados do século XIX, os objetos não-ocidentais frequentemente apareciam nas exposições etnográficas de museus de história natural e de antropologia. No mesmo período, alguns “artefatos” da Ásia foram classificados como artes decorativas. No século XX, eles migraram para os museus de arte e formaram “arte islâmica”, “arte asiática”, “arte primitiva” e coleções semelhantes. No final do século XX, museus de antropologia e exposições etnográficas receberam muitas críticas de sua posição frente a outras culturas. Nas últimas décadas, muitos museus abordaram a questão de várias maneiras. Uma das abordagens mais comuns baseia-se na recategorização de antigos objetos etnográficos e na sua apresentação como obras de arte. No entanto, a eficácia dessa abordagem está sujeita a muitos debates. Este artigo discute a diferença entre exposições etnográficas/antropológicas e exposições históricas de arte em dois importantes museus da cidade de Nova York, o American Natural History Museum e o Metropolitan Museum of Art, a fim de explorar algumas semelhanças que destacam esses polos supostamente opostos.

Palavras-chave

Outro. Exposições etnográficas. Museu de Arte. Humanidades digitais.

Established in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, the modern museum inherited objects from various sources including princely art galleries, cabinets of curiosity, individual collections, archaeological excavations, and later, industrial exhibitions and anthropological collections. The early museums, in the words of William Henry Flower, were created by “bringing a number of specimens together by haphazard and cramming them as closely as possible” (1898:18). By the mid-nineteenth century, however, classification became an important concern of the exhibitionary complex¹. One of the first divisions was made between the works of nature and the works of man. While the natural objects and Western art found a clear place in this system, most non-Western objects had an ambiguous location. As George Brown Goode summarized it in the closing of the century,

On the one side stands the natural-history collections, undoubtedly best to be administrated by the geologists, botanist, and zoologist. On the other side are the fine-art collections, best to be arranged, from an aesthetic standpoint, by artists. Between is a territory which no English word can adequately describe – which the Germans call *Culturgeschichte* – the natural history of civilization, of man and his ideas and achievements (1891: 440).

This in-between territory was marked by ethnographic/anthropological objects or “artifacts”. In a typical mid-nineteenth century manner, the renowned President of the Royal Academy of Art and a trustee of the National Gallery, Charles Eastlake, suggested that “all objects, of any age or place, which are the work of man, if not ranging under the class of fine art, may come under the class of mechanical art, and therefore belong to an Ethnographical Museum”(1853:460). This distinction between art and the ethnographic object was easily projected upon a map that distinguished the West from the rest of the world.

In the second half of the 19th century, many natural history museums included a narrative of mankind that explained human races and ethnic groups as a result of adopting to their environment. Many anthropological objects, which were by definition non-Western, were used to represent different human groups. These objects were soon accompanied by other forms of representation, such as photographs, dioramas, and occasionally life performances. By the formation of the anthropology museum in the early-twentieth century, similar exhibition techniques were employed for representing evolutionary theories.

On the other hand, since the mid-nineteenth century, international exhibitions included many non-Western objects of decorative art, especially from Asia. Starting with the South Kensington Museum in London (today’s Victoria and Albert Museum), a small group of non-western objects entered the museum domain as objects of aesthetic value. At the museums of decorative art, the so-called “Oriental” objects were exhibited as examples of successful application of the allegedly universal principles of taste. Although clearly distinguished from art objects, the objects of decorative art were not displayed as ethnographic objects. By the turn of the century, however, an art-historical narrative replaced the emphasis on aesthetics. In the twentieth century, many artifacts of decorative art migrated to art museums and many survey museums, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, increasingly reclassified their non-Western objects to form “Islamic art”, “Asian art”, “primitive art”, and similar collections.

Since the 1970s, a wave of criticism, particularly influenced by postcolonial theories, has resulted in

further changes in museum displays of “non-Western” objects. In particular, ethnographic displays have been challenged. In one of the early influential texts, Johannes Fabian criticized the ethnographical gaze that had resulted in objectifying the other cultures on display. He underlined the significance of the “rhetoric of vision” in distancing and objectifying the ethnographic Other. “As long as anthropology presents its object primarily as seen, as long as ethnographic knowledge is conceived primarily as observation and/or representation (...) it is likely to persist in denying coevalness to its Other” (1983: 151–52). The museum, anthropology’s “institutional ‘homeland’”, received a similar criticism (Stocking, 1985:6). Scholars have criticized the idea of an objective representation of another culture and the power dynamic in this relationship (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Karp *et al.*, 1992).

At the same time, a large body of criticism has focused on art-ethnography binary. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out, while art is considered singular, the ethnographic object is treated as a document of the context from which it is taken (1991: 391–393). In Pomian’s words, art objects are “sources of aesthetic pleasure” and artifacts “constitute the key to greater historical or scientific knowledge” (1991: 9). Unlike artwork, an ethnographic object is a transparent object. It “only has interest if we are able to ‘read’ it” (Bal, 1996: 206). The former’s authenticity is located in “its uniqueness and the personal authority of its maker”, and the latter’s in “its originating society”. Whereas “civilized”/“art” is produced by an individual, “primitive”/“folklore” or “ethnographic object” is produced by a collective, and while “art” speaks for itself, “ethnography” needs to be explained and is subjected to scientific scrutiny (Sturge, 2014: 150–153). As MacGaffey (2003: 249) argues, the idea of art is necessary “for particular definitions of what it is to be civilized”. Art has been defined “by whatever lack in other people” in order to explain “the assumed absence of civilization among them”.

In fact, the past two or three decades have witnessed many changes to these practices. On a larger scale, some collections have migrated from natural history and anthropology museums to art museums. The most controversial example is perhaps the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, created in 2006. With its apparently neutral name, quai Branly housed collections which were formerly kept at one of the important institutions of French anthropology, Musée de l’Homme, and merge them with objects from the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, the offspring of a colonial exhibition. The reclassification of these former anthropological objects as art objects at the Musée du quai Branly ignited heated debates. Critics have scrutinized this apparent abandoning of the anthropological project, from different angles, from the exhibition techniques to the occasional jumbling of the objects, from its mystified, immersive gallery spaces with meandering paths to the wilderness in which the building is placed, from the absence of historical context to its refusal to acknowledge the colonial past, etc. (Price, 2007; Dias, 2008).

While the Musée du quai Branly has been rightly criticized for falling short of presenting its former “primitive art” objects as “art”, the complexity of exhibiting “non-Western” objects, as the very exclusive term itself suggests, is far beyond the techniques of appreciating them as art objects. Many other museums, such as the Louvre and the British Museum, have adopted an additive approach, mixing the anesthetizing features with academic precision. Yet, the impacts of these reclassifications and changes of exhibition techniques are subject to debate. This paper explores two major museums to argue that while the change of exhibition genre offers many remedies, this seemingly bold gesture cannot completely dispense with the ethnographical implications of the earlier displays.

The American Natural History Museum (ANHM) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met.) on opposite sides of the Central Park in New York City could be seen as two poles of the mainstream approached to the exhibition of non-Western objects. On the one hand, ANHM is one of the few museums that has preserved many features of the early-twentieth-century ethnographic displays, including the infamous life-style dioramas of non-Western people and cultures. On the other hand, the Met., established around the same time as AMNH, is an art museum, which has undergone many renovations with a sharp awareness of the current criticisms.

The American Museum of Natural History

A sanitized version of the earlier natural history museums can be found at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Established in 1869, AMNH has preserved the early-twentieth-century natural history museum’s approach to the exhibition of non-Western objects. Its role in creating ahistorical and primitive “others” can be seen at different levels. The Museum includes “Cultural Halls” for “African People”, “Asian people”, “Pacific People”, “South American People”, and “Mexico and Central America”, along with halls for mammals, birds and other elements of nature from these regions. This inclusion of “cultural halls” in the museum of “natural” history has clear implications. However, more striking than this joining of nature and culture is the selective exclusion of parts of humanity. “European Mammals” are exhibited, but not European people. Similarly, there are halls of “North American Mammals” and “North American Forests”. However, there is no Hall of “North American People”, though American Indians are on display. Not to be mistaken for white Americans, they are exhibited in halls with the word “Indian” in their titles and distinctively marked by their environments: “Plains Indians”, “Northwest Coast”, and “Eastern Woodlands Indians”.

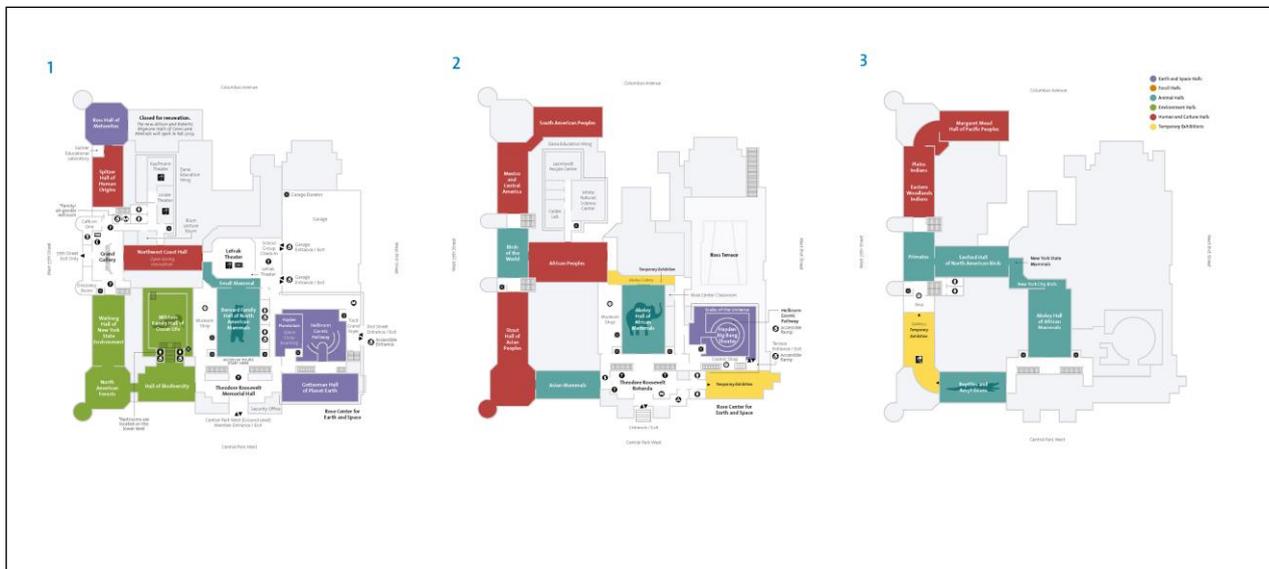


Fig. 1. Floor Maps, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 2018.

New York, where the Museum is located, receives particular attention: “New York State Environment”, “New York State Mammals”, and “New York City Birds” are exhibited in distinctive collections. “New York people”, however, appear not on display, but as those who can understand and improve the environment in exhibitions such as “Felix M. Warburg Hall of New York State Environment”. The “Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples” is named after the anthropologist and former curator at the Museum, who designed the hall in 1970 (AMNH). The “Gardner D. Stout Hall of Asian People” is named after a former president of the Museum. Other Euro-American names appear in the titles of collections or galleries only as anthropologists, writers, collectors or downers, such as “Morgan Memorial Hall of Gems”, “Akeley Hall of African Mammals” and “Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origin”.

Above all, “[a]s part of New York State’s official memorial to Theodor Roosevelt”, the main rotunda of the building is named after the former president of the United States (AMNH). At the Central Park Entrance of AMNH, a 1939 statue celebrates Roosevelt on horseback with two Indian and African men at his sides. The Museum website’s description of this hall has no explicit mention of Roosevelt’s accusation of racism. Instead, according to AMNH website, the “Theodor Roosevelt Memorial Hall” examines the former president in four stages of his life:

as a young naturalist with an early passion for nature; a firsthand observer whose experience as a rancher in the North Dakota Badlands impressed him with the threat of extinction to animals such as the American bison; the Conservation President who took unprecedented action and placed some 230 million acres under federal protection; and lifelong Explorer whose post-presidency expeditions took him to an arduous exploration of Brazil’s River of Doubt (AMNH).

This image of the white president who explores, studies, loves, understand, and saves, nature is in sharp contrast to the unknown, stereotyped groups of people who have been presented as the objects of such knowledge and exploration.

The Museum’s oldest hall, the “Northwest Coast Hall”, opened in 1899. It was originally designed by Franz Boas, the influential anthropologist of the early-twentieth century. Boas changed the common practice of the late-nineteenth century, which often grouped objects and tools based on their functions and physical features. Instead, he grouped objects based on their cultural origins. This practice became the basis of the exhibitions at AMNH. For AMNH, this cultural grouping alone suffices to declare Boas’ design as one that “value[d] indigenous cultures on their own terms, not in relation to Western cultures” (AMNH). This statement is perhaps an attempt to justify the museum’s clear refusal of exhibiting non-Western objects as artworks. The exhibition, however, also features one of Boas’ most infamous inventions, dioramas or “life-groups”. Here realistic mannequins were placed in a constructed context to provide a still moment of the “typical” activities of each culture. This practice has been widely criticized for its panopticon displays that establish implicit power dynamics of the subject and objects of knowledge. AMNH, however, has since continued its human dioramas. In fact, the similarity between the exhibition of animals and human almost explicitly reduces the people on display to the level of nature [Figs. 2 and 3].



Fig. 2. A typical diorama at the Hall of African Mammals, American Museum of Natural History. Photographed by author, 2019.



Fig. 3. A typical diorama at the Hall of African People; American Museum of Natural History. Photographed by author, 2019.

Halls are called “cultural halls” in an apparent attempt to respect the people and separate them from nature. However, the people on exhibit are rendered either as a part of nature or as the direct product of natural forces. The implied close affinity between these peoples and their environments is normalized through curatorial notes. For instance, the Hall of Asian People “explores the continent’s history and cultural diversity”. Or the museum’s Amazon featherwork “comes from the native people of the Amazon Basin, whose survival is now in danger along with that of the rain forest” (AMNH). This verbal narrative that equates non-Western people with nature is reflected in the exhibitions. Throughout the museum, artifacts, models, illustrations, documentary films, and photographs show people in a pre-culture status. Objects are grouped to document timeless stereotypes. Labels offer almost no date or specific place of origin, maintaining the objects – and the people represent by them – in a present past-ness.

The strong impact of environment suggested by the Museum layout is further reinforced by the subdivision of the continental groups based on climate or geography. African People, for instance, are divided into grasslands, deserts, forests, and river regions, suggesting that certain similarities and differences among the peoples of these regions are primarily created by natural forces. Each group of people is introduced through a set of characteristics that illustrate their rituals, social structure, beliefs, etc. The curatorial notes further relate these characteristics to the environment at the basic level of survival. A typical label accompanying an African desert panorama reads:

Often mountainous and rocky rather than sandy, the desert may seem barren of ground cover but has patches of vegetation suitable for grazing sheep or goats, (...) By and large, however, continual movement is needed. Berber nomads (...) never stay in one place more than a few days as they exploit the limited resources south of the Atlas Mountain.

After explaining the influence of the limited resources on Berber’s lifestyle, it concludes, “Desert life is competitive and brings a strong territorial sense leading to constant friction and danger of fighting. The Berber form chieftainships for the common defense, and each group is attached to a chief’s fortress, (...) to which it can retreat”. The text then continues by explaining the family structure in nomadic life. The aforementioned realistic dioramas capture the role of the environment and its impact on people. This emphasis on the effect of the environment as the prime source of social structure, rituals, or religious beliefs sets the stage for an idea of a still culture, which is present throughout the exhibition. The people thus defined are depicted as so restricted by natural forces that have maintained their rituals for centuries, as explicitly suggested in other notes.

The exhibition of non-Western people based on the status of nature must be understood as part of a larger discourse that has systematically defined the West’s relationship with its “others”. In the nineteenth century, the application of the conventional evolutionary theory on human history resulted in a notion of a universal pattern of a directional, progressive, irreversible evolution, which interpreted differences between cultures in terms of stages of progress. The anthropology thus formed, looked at the present of the so-called “primitive” cultures in order to understand the past of modern societies. In this context, the aim of the museum, as an early-twentieth-century curator put it, was “to discriminate and illustrate the stages of human culture, in other words, to trace the growth and development of civilization” (Murray, 1904: 234). In this evolutionary discourse, having history was not simply one more merit of the white man but the basis of his supremacy over the “primitive” or the “savage” who despite

living at the present time was frozen in the past. There are countless accounts of the twentieth-century staged photographs that represented the native subjects in uncultured gestures and clothing. They were almost always presented in seemingly more “authentic” clothing, even when they had adopted a Western style of dressing.

In contemporary museum practice, the evolutionary exhibition of people is almost unanimously abandoned. None of the earlier pejorative terms such as “negro”, “primitive”, or “savage”, are used anymore. Neither is there any explicit attribution of primitiveness in the curatorial notes or labels. Nevertheless, immobility and primitiveness are implied through some other techniques mainly operating on mechanisms of stereotyping. New York’s Natural History Museum again provides some typical examples. It exhibits geo-ethnic groups through a few simple, fixed characteristics. For example, the “Islamic World”, as a section within the Hall of Asian People, is introduced through life-sized mannequins and some antique objects ordered in showcases with titles such as “the spread of the Faith”, “the history of the Faith”, [Fig. 4] “the civilization” “women of Islam”, and “music of Islam”. The extreme simplification of displays and the accompanying curatorial notes are only possible based on the premise of an unchanging essence. For instance, the selective collection that exhibits “the Women of Islam” clearly reiterates the stereotypical perception of the homogeneity of the practice of covering the body in Islam [Fig. 5]. Not surprisingly, the labels are often in the simple present tense. Presented in Orientalist installations, the distinctively old objects, which stand for the entire civilization, reinforce the sense of immutability.

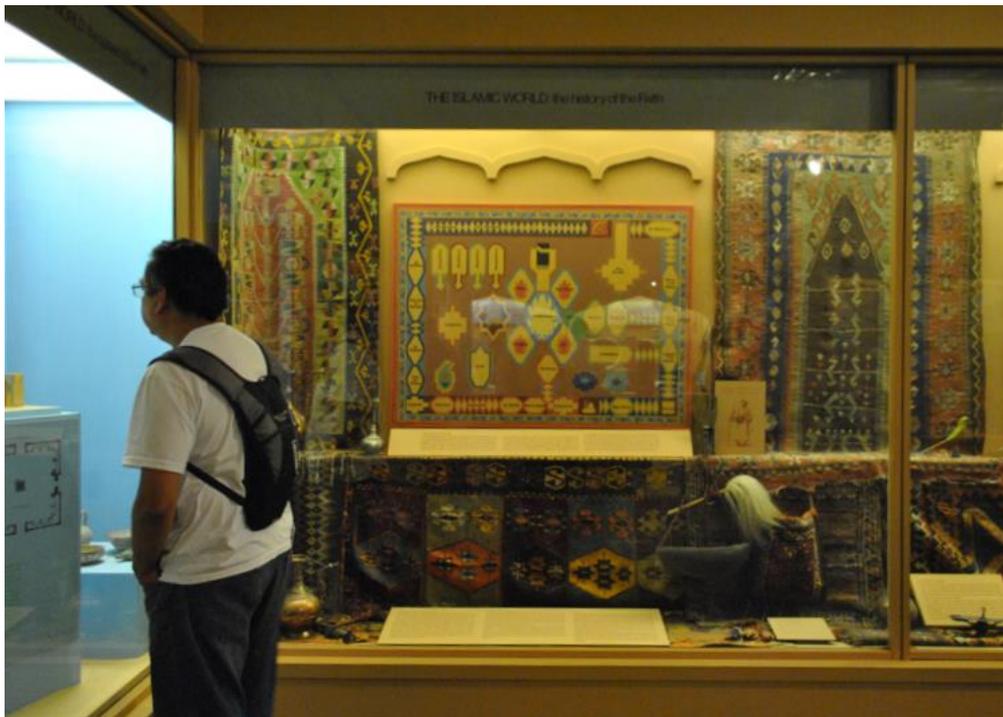


Fig. 4. Showcase “The Islamic World: the history of the Faith”; the Gardner D. Stout Hall of Asian Peoples; American Museum of Natural History. Photographed by author, 2015.



Fig. 5. Showcase "Women of Islam"; the Gardner D. Stout Hall of Asian Peoples; American Museum of Natural History. Photographed by author, 2015.

Following the postcolonial criticisms of the late-twentieth century, the decrease of interest in racial theories, and the decline of the ethnographic display's popularity, evolutionary exhibitions have been almost unanimously abandoned. Many exhibition techniques have changed. In fact, the simplistic ethnographic exhibitions of AMNH are rare in contemporary practice². Most of the cultural objects have been removed from natural history museums; few have been returned to their "original tribes" and many have been reclassified in other museums. As the nineteenth-century line between art history and ethnography has been challenged, an increasing number of museums have declared their non-Western objects as "art". These bold acts are often promoted as gestures of inclusion, which grant the status of art to the objects beyond the Western domain. However, calling them "art" and adopting Western art display techniques does not automatically result in any change in the otherness of these objects. As James Clifford has pointed out, "the modern genealogy of culture and art (...) increasingly appears to be simply *extended* to non-Western peoples and things. They can at worst be *imposed*, at best *translated* – both historically and politically contingent operations" (1986: 236). Similarly, Donald Preziosi argues that when the universal idea of art history was applied to the non-Western arts "all different objects are ranked as primitive, exotic, charming, or fascinating distortions of a central classical (European) canon or standard" (2003: 117). While many critics have problematized the very institution of the museum and the practice of Hegelian art history as the core of the problem, most museums have remained at the level of offering remedies that focus on improving the representation of non-Western objects.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Established in 1870 on the other side of Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum of Art exemplifies today's most common approach to the exhibition of non-Western objects. At the Met., non-Western collections are housed next to Western arts within the same building. Unlike the British Museum and the Louvre, no collection of non-Western objects is isolated from the main body of the Museum. There is no diorama or explicitly ethnographic exhibition. Throughout the Museum, most exhibitions convey chronological order. Many galleries use wall-mounted descriptions that provide historical context. While the ethnographic approach is not entirely absent in the exhibition, there is no apparent attempt in bringing a culture to life through its objects. Following the logic of the singularity of artwork, objects are distinguished and individually described in labels that specify their date and place of origin.



Fig. 6. A showcase of Qur'anic manuscripts; the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographed by author, 2015.

The Met.'s exhibitions are very different from the ahistorical generalizations of AMNH. For instance, while AMNH exhibited "the Hall of Islam" as part of Asian People, which had reduced its diversity into stereotypical generalizations, at the Met. diversity is acknowledged even in the name of the collection – "Arts of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia". While AMNH framed the

Qur'an as simply an object of faith, the Met. provides different layers of information. For instance, the label accompanying the showcases of the Qur'anic manuscripts begins with a cultural context and explains that "To Muslims, the Qur'an is considered the literal word of God; a visual analogue for the Divine". Then it adds some historical information: "The text of the Qur'an was codified and standardized in the year 651 by order of Caliph 'Uthman (r. 644-56)". At another level, the main body of the text provides stylistic information, which is carefully contextualized:

The angular scripts of the early period (7th-10th centuries) are generally known as *kufic*, named after the city of Kufa in southern Iraq. Angular, horizontal, extended forms and even spaces between unconnected letters characterized these early parchment manuscripts, many create in oblong format. After the early 10th century, when paper came into more frequent use, Qur'ans were increasingly produced in a vertical format, reflecting the relationship between the verticality of "new style" script and the manuscript pages. This script is characterized by elongated and slim letters with tall shafts.

The description of the individual folios also contains detailed historical accounts of the object's place of origin and their stylistic features. A similar emphasis on the artistic value of the objects could be found in their mode of exhibition. The ample distance among objects reinforces the idea of the singularity of the artwork. Even techniques such as placing the accompanying labels away from the object and below the eye level invite the visitor to first encounter the artwork in its material form [Fig. 6].

However, despite these fundamental differences, the otherness of these arts is hardly attacked. Many features, such as the disproportioned distribution of objects, as well as other accompanying exhibition techniques, have resulted in shallow histories. Most of the Met.'s non-Western collections are named after geographical regions, which often gather vast distinct areas in one collection. The galleries of Oceania, in the words of its curators, brings "A Third of the World in Three Rooms" (Kjellgren *et al.*, 2011). Other geographically-labeled collections, such as "Eastern Art", house objects from 5th Millennium B.C. to the present time. In contrast, European objects are distributed among different collections with temporal specifications: "Greek and Roman Art", "Medieval Art", "European Paintings, 1250-1800", "nineteenth and early-twentieth Century European Paintings and Sculpture" and "Modern and Contemporary Art" [Fig. 7]. When contrasted to Western art, whose history has been divided into sequences of time periods, the bulk grouping of objects of other collections implies an essential consistency of material culture. Although most collections reflect some chronological order in subdivisions, in the larger picture of the Museum, these collections appear as ahistorical entities. This implication of the stillness of non-Western cultures is intensified by the predominance of Western objects in collections such as "Modern and Contemporary Art". Figure 8 shows the country of origin of the objects included in the "Modern and Contemporary Art" Collection. While the majority of objects are from the United States, many artworks have a European origin. However, almost no object outside of America and Europe are considered to be part of the global modern and contemporary.

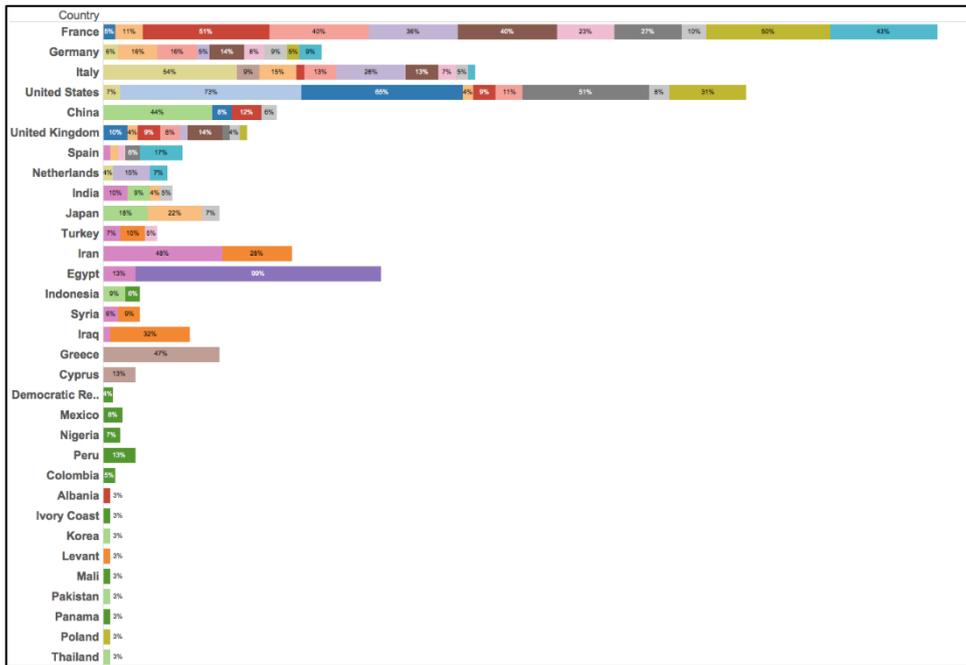


Fig. 7. The distribution of objects from different countries across collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Data collected in 2016.

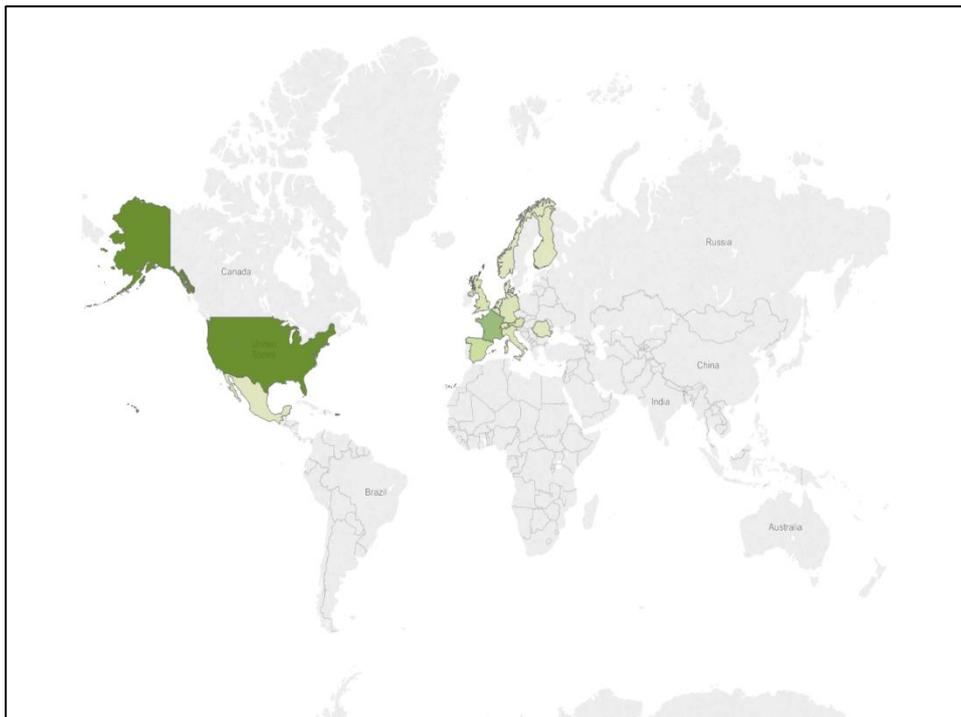


Fig. 8. The country of origin of the objects at Modern and Contemporary Art Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Data collected in 2016.

At the same time, some Western collections are further distributed among different collections with similar contents. For instance, “Medieval Art”, the “Cloister”, and “Robert Lehman Collection” exhibit similar objects from the same period. Further layers are added to European art by thematic or medium-based divisions. For instance, Paintings of 1250-1800 are separated from sculpture and decorative arts of the same period, while often more congruous objects are juxtaposed in galleries of Islamic art or Eastern art. As can be seen in Figure 9, objects from countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and the United States have a prominent presence in about 10 collections, while non-Western countries often do not appear in more than two collections.

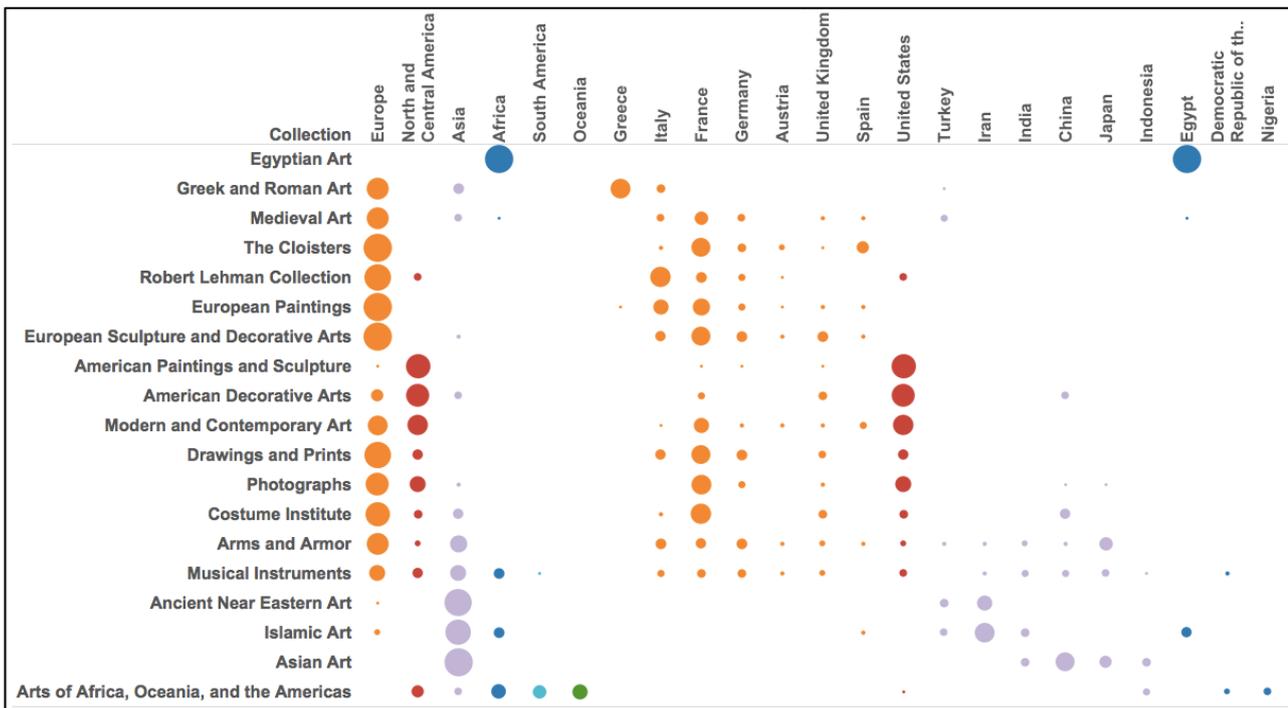


Fig. 9. The prominence of objects from different continents/countries in exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Data collected in 2016.

In contrast, packing a variety of objects from vast regions and times in extremely smaller areas implies a lasting essence. For instance, while paintings from the fifteenth-century Venice and the fifteenth-century Florence are properly distinguished in two separate galleries, a single room houses the objects including bowls, pottery, jewelry, paintings, books, coins, rugs, tiles, stuccos, and other objects from “Iran and Central Asia, 9th through 13th centuries” [Fig. 10]. Another gallery exhibits “Arts of the Ottoman Court, 14th through 20th Centuries”, with an equally diverse body of objects. Together with 13 other rooms with similarly eclectic contents, they constitute the Islamic art collection. As a result, not only has the chronological order been shrunken into a much smaller space, and cannot be easily perceived, but also arts are essentialized. For what can be presented and perceived is not difference but similarity. In other

words, the variety of material, the span of time and the diversity of regions united within a single collection supports and demands an idea of an underlying essence. This timeless essence also carries a certain past-ness that most curators have faced when including contemporary objects. An Islamic art exhibition, for instance, typically does not include objects beyond the nineteenth century, while at the same time it is expected to function as the representative of a “Muslim world” that exists to the present day. While the Met.’s techniques of display appear to be fundamentally different from the ethnographic exhibitions of museums such as AMNH, the category of the “other” and its accompanying stereotypes have been barely changed. While AMNH deprives non-Western cultures of historicity by maintaining them at the status of nature and rendering them as static communities, the Met. creates shallow histories, which imply a-historicity when contrasted to the deep histories of the Western exhibitions in the same building. While the lack of exhibition space or the material to display are important considerations, more important are the extremely broad range of objects, the vast regions, and undistinguished times that are gathered under single categories. That is to say, it is the issue of the museum classificatory system.



Fig. 10. Gallery 455 "Iran and Central Asia (13th – 16th Centuries)"; The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographed by author, 2015.

The past few decades have witnessed many changes to the exhibitions of non-Western objects. Collections have been expanded, renamed, and rearranged, often reflecting some regional divisions and following chronological order. Techniques of exhibition have been refined. Labels and accompanying media have been modified to convey more contextual information. In a new trend, many collections are given geographical designations or neutral names. Yet, these re-classifications and renovations have had little effect on the role of the museum in promoting the idea of “otherness”. For instance, all over the world, collections have been renamed with titles such as the “Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas”. However, despite its removal from the title, the notion of “primitive art” is recreated through this act of grouping. For neither the formal features of the objects nor their many distinct geographical areas suggest a substantial connection among these vast regions [Fig. 11]. Rather their main commonality is the historical title of this unity – the “primitive”. As a result, what could have been a threat to the stability of units is often formulated as a cross-cultural exchange. This, in effect, solidifies the old self-contained categories. While the Met.’s exhibition strategies widely differ from AMNH’s, it eventually perpetuates the stereotypical image of ahistorical, non-Western cultures, though in a subdued version.



Fig. 11. The origin of the objects included in “The Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Data collected in 2016.

Needless to say, contemporary museums are conditioned by the collections they have inherited, their institutional structure, the public expectation, etc. Many art museums have taken measures similar to the Met.’s to modify their representations of the “others”. However, the core of the problem, the very structure that created the art of the “other” as essentially ethnographic, has been barely questioned. Since the nineteenth century, as Donald Preziosi (2003) reminds us, art, particularly non-Western art, has never been detached from a representational function. In fact, Hegelian art history’s great contribution to the nation-making project has been the fabrication of the unique characteristics of

aesthetic sensibilities within distinct nations through which the idea of styles promotes and naturalizes coherent identities. The very idea of a universal survey museum, allegedly a place to represent the entire world and its history, is based on a Western notion of a historical self, which requires and perpetually recreates the a-historical “other”. The essentially ethnographic nature of the art of the other – the very fact that the objects have been categorized based on an alleged connection among their creators – easily lends these objects to stereotyped exhibitions, which in turn recreates the a-historical cultures. This ethnographic approach to the art of the other has been fundamental to the museum/art history discourse since the nineteenth century. In 1857 John Ruskin claimed, “History only tells us what [nations] did; Art tells us their feelings, and why they did it” (Hobhouse, 1857: para. 2437). One may argue, as long as the categories of Hegelian art history/museum are maintained, the apparently neutral geographical designation cannot offer more than the table of contents; the academic precision of chronological order and geographical distribution can only solidify the apparent reality of these categories. These corrections often only mask the inevitability ethnographic nature of the art of the other.

References

- AMNH. “Hall of Pacific Peoples”. *American Museum of Natural History*, <<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/pacific-peoples>>. Accessed 31 May 2019.
- _____. “Theodore Roosevelt Memorial: Our Conservation President”. *American Museum of Natural History*, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/roosevelt-memorial>. Accessed 31 May 2019.
- _____. “Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda: Welcome to the Museum”. *American Museum of Natural History*, <<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/roosevelt-rotunda>>. Accessed 31 May 2019.
- BAL, M. “The Discourse of the Museum”. *Thinking about Exhibitions*, 1996.
- BENNETT, T. *The Exhibitionary Complex*. *Thinking about Exhibition*, 1994.
- CLIFFORD, J. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Harvard University Press, 1986.
- DIAS, N. Double Erasures: Rewriting the Past at the Musée Du Quai Branly. *Social Anthropology*, vol. 16, n. 3, p. 300–11, 2008.
- FABIAN, J. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. Edited by Matti Bunzl, Columbia University Press, 1983.
- FLOWER, W. H. *Essays on Museums and Other Subjects Connected with Natural History*, by Sir William Henry Flower. Macmillan, 1898.
- GEERTZ, C. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford University Press, 1988.
- GOODE, G.B. *The Museums of the Future*. Government Ptg. Office, 1891.
- HOBHOUSE, J. C., Bn. Broughton. *Report of the National Gallery Site Commission, Together with the Minutes, Evidence, Appendix, and Index*. Session 1857, <http://gateway.proquest.com/libraries.colorado.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88004&res_dat=xri:hcpc-s&rft_dat=xri:hcpc:rec:1857-033430>.
- KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, B. *Objects of Ethnography. Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 1991.
- KJELLGREN, E. et al. *A Third of the World in Three Rooms—Redesigning the Oceanic Galleries*. 2011, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/aaoa/sam-oceania-galleries>>.

MACGAFFEY, W. Crossing the River: Myth and Movement in Central Africa. *International Symposium Angola on the Move: Transport Routes, Communication, and History*. Annais. Berlin, 2003, p. 24–26.

MURRAY, D. *Museums, Their History and Their Use: With a Bibliography and List of Museums in the United Kingdom*. Glasgow, J. MacLehose and sons, vol. 1, 1904.

POMIAN, K. Museum, Nation, National Museum. *Le Débat*, n. 3, p. 160–168, 1991.

PREZIOSI, D. The Museum of What You Shall Have Been. In: *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 116–36.

PRICE, S. *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence of the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Management of the National Gallery; Also to Consider in What Mode the Collective Monuments of Antiquity and Fine Art Possessed by the Nation May Be Most Securely Preserved, Judiciously Augmented, and Advantageously Exhibited to the Public. 1853.

STOCKING, G. *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, <http://aurarialibrary.worldcat.org/title/objects-and-others-essays-on-museums-and-material-culture/oclc/12215475&referer=brief_results>.

STURGE, K. *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and Museum*. Routledge, 2014.

Notas

* Ph.D. University of Colorado. Mohammadzadeh Kive is an Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon. E-mail: skive@uoregon.edu. ORCID: <0000-0002-8220-6410>.

¹ The term “exhibitionary complex” is borrowed from Tony Bennett (1994).

² The recent years, movements of “Decolonizing This Place” have targeted AMNH for its exhibitions as well as the Roosevelt statue at its entrance.

Artigo recebido em maio de 2019. Aprovado em julho de 2019.