Representing Others:
A Look inside Nonwestern and Indigenous Exhibitions
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ABSTRACT

Nonwestern art and cultures are often misunderstood within western societies. This, in part, is due to the current state of exhibitions of nonwestern cultures in western settings. This report explores representation of nonwestern and indigenous cultures within western museums, determining if an accurate and authentic exhibition is possible. Research conducted through scholarly books, articles and journals will be further explored through the support of case studies and interviews with museum professionals and experts. In this report, I explore the politics of representation as well as the elements of curation and display, in attempts to find the degree in which an exhibition can be accurate and authentic; ultimately, I argue that exhibitions of nonwestern and indigenous peoples and cultures in western museums can never truly be authentic or accurate, but by addressing certain elements and eliminating certain practices, these exhibitions can provide a platform for better understanding ourselves and others.
INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions are never neutral. Even when attempted, neutrality is impossible to obtain due to various factors and aspects. Politics of representation, curatorial elements of display and our existing perceptions of the world constantly shape our understanding of exhibitions and those being represented. In a world where inside and outside factors affect our views on peoples and cultures, is it possible for museums to obtain an accurate and authentic representation of others?

Though museums can acknowledge the politics of representations and alter curatorial practices to an extent, certain components can never be fully eliminated, therefore, prohibiting a truly accurate and authentic exhibition. Furthermore, while accurateness and authenticity is unobtainable, these exhibits are needed due to the platform it provides for better understanding ourselves and others through promoting questioning and exploration.
A SOCIETY THAT GENERALIZES

We all generalize. In fact, our society uses generalizations to simplify the world, so that we can better understand it. However, even if unintentional, more often than not, generalizations lead to the formation and affirmation of stereotypes. Some state that stereotypes, like generalizations, are used to understand the majority, but Dr. Curtis Keim, a history professor at Moravian College, argues elsewise. “To say that we inevitably use stereotypes is really to say that we use mental models to think about reality. But the word stereotype also implies that some models are so limiting that they deform reality in ways that are offensive, dangerous, or ridiculous.” (Keim, p. 7, 2009). Stereotypes are, indeed, extremely detrimental to both our society and others.

To demonstrate the extent to which stereotypes morph individual and societal perceptions on a topic, let us briefly look at the example of Africa. It is of no shock to say there are many stereotypes about Africa and the people living there; however, the power that those stereotypes have over individual and societal perceptions is often unrealized or unacknowledged. In one of his classes, Dr. Keim asked his college students to share words that came to mind when thinking about the African continent. The list acquired words including “poverty, ignorance, hut, native, savage, tribe, safari, lion, and elephant” amongst others (Keim, 2009). Negative words associated with multiple stereotypes overwhelmed the list. Though these words could be connected to certain areas of Africa, so too could a variety of other, more positive words. Dr. Keim’s goal in
this exercise was not to make the students feel bad or embarrassed, but to show that we are all subject to stereotypes, and therefore, they are extremely dangerous.

What do we think when we hear “Africa”? These two images depict different aspects of life in Africa. While both depict realities, in most scenarios our society focuses on the left image and similar depictions. Image 1 (Left): Peoples of Ethiopia; Image 2 (Right): The University of Cape Town in South Africa. Photo (left) © Joanna Eede; Photo (right) © Adrian Frith

Stereotypes cause otherness or difference to be seen as a negative trait, or even a problem in some cases. Our society quickly assumes that because someone is not like us, then they must be lesser, in the wrong, or in need of change (Keim, 2009). Keim states, “If we are not aware of what is actually happening, we might wrongly conclude, consciously or unconsciously, that the other culture or persons actually have a different nature from ours because they belong to a different race or because they are witches, or animals, or monsters, or aliens. Or we might conclude that others need us to show them how to act more naturally, more like we do.” (Keim, p. 176, 2009). If not addressed, this mindset will continue to be used and could cause even further damage. Though it is impossible to understand what we do and avoid generalizations
completely, our society needs to recognize when we do generalize and acknowledge the implications that arise with the use of such.

Stereotypes stem from numerous sources: media, newspaper, books, films, education, and amusement parks, amongst others; but perhaps most problematic is the museum due to the assumption that museums offers completely accurate and authentic representations (note: problematic does not infer most influential or worst in this context).
THE MUSEUM

The “museum” can be thought as both a concept and an institution (Thomas, 2010). Much like religion, which can be separated into the practiced faith (the concept) and the Church or other governing body (the institution), museums can be divided into the idea of displaying objects and knowledge and the business organizations. The concept of the museum has been present throughout time—the desire to understand ourselves and others led us to preserving and presenting artifacts and knowledge. As the desire to showcase grew, the system of presenting became more organized and formal, leading to the creation of the museum as an intuition. The Ancient Greeks built temples for the gods, filling them with sculptures (NPR, 2008); wealthy royals showcased their prized possessions in their Wunderkammer, or “chamber of wonders” (NPR, 2008); and European palaces displayed the most respected and prized paintings (NPR, 2008). Still, museums developed even further, eventually creating the major public institutions we know today.

How have museums evolved throughout time? Image 3 (left) is of a European temple where art and sculptures would likely be stored; the image 4 (right) is of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Photo (left) © Dynamic Dominic; Photo (right) © Stevenuccia.
Now, museums have become not only institutions, but major business. Subjects ranging from science to history and purposes ranging from entertainment to education, “[m]ajor museums are in the business of displaying objects from their collection or on loan from other museums.” (Desai, p. 119, 2000). Still, while each museum has its individual mission, an often goal of all types is to be both authentic and accurate.

Depending on the museum’s mission, this goal exists for different reasons and purposes. In museums focusing on the arts and humanities, where various peoples and cultures are displayed, this goal exists because it is thought to “dismantle dominant stereotypic representations of race, ethnicity, and culture” (Desai, p. 114, 2000). Essentially, representing accurately and authentically results in an avoidance of misrepresentation and dissembles stereotypes from past ones. However, while admirable and perhaps necessary, the goal is, still, unrealistic. To achieve full accurateness and authenticity, one must not only avoid being inaccurate and unauthentic, but must achieve a variety of other required components, which are unobtainable. Therefore, the goal of portraying an accurate and authentic representation in museums is simply not possible.
POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Accurateness and authenticity can never be fully obtained when representing others. While a degree of accurateness and authenticity can be reached, complete accurateness and authenticity is not possible due to numerous factors, above all being context. Context, including sub-components of location, fragmentation and existing ideas and beliefs, prohibits representations of others from ever being completely accurate and completely authentic. Because of context, museums, regardless of their efforts, will never be able to have a complete accurate and authentic representation.

When we represent others, we do just that: “re-present” (Alcoff, 2011; Desai, 2000). We represent someone or something based on our pre-existing knowledge and our own individual understandings. This embedded information is unique based on each individual person, and consequently, each individual’s interpretation and understanding of the representation is unique. This information, extant in both the viewer and displayer, causes representations of others and interpretation of these representations to be subjective and perhaps, even somewhat biased.

Though much of our understanding and interpretation of representations is due to the knowledge and beliefs of the displayer and viewer, the concluding interpretation affects a much larger population. In fact, regardless of our intentions, we always affect those who we represent (Alcoff, 2011). When we represent others, we are speaking about them, and inevitably also for
them. The viewer is seeing an indirect representation, created by the displayer from their limited understanding, interpretation and artifacts of the peoples and culture, instead of a direct one, created by the peoples who are being represented. Essentially, the viewer is seeing the displayer’s story and/or point of view (Alcoff, 2011).

The issue that arises with this is that these representations often result in someone speaking about and for the represented population in a way in which the represented is being silenced or always only partially and incompletely represented. As Tring T. Minh-ha states, it becomes a “conversation of ‘us’ and ‘us’ about ‘them,’ of the white man with the white man about the primitive nature man... in which ‘them’ is silenced.” (Minh-ha, 1989). The representation is not only an interpretation of another’s (the displayer) interpretation or understanding, but it also fails to include the most important people—those who are being represented. Unfortunately, this often leads to the represented having no voice in this representation and in many times in society, as well. This lacking component results in the representation not only being incomplete, but also only partially accurate and partially authentic due to its source, or lack of original source. While certain steps and practices may be used to acknowledge or lessen this issue, we can never fully eliminate it because the viewer and displayer are always active and cannot be controlled (Karp and Lavine, 1991).

Moreover, representations are constantly limited by our resources and point of view. These ideas are connected to the concepts of location and fragmentation. Museums simply cannot
present every item and piece of information about a culture and peoples. Even if a museum had
and displayed every single existing object of a culture, the museum would lack social information
including interactions and relationships as well as the stories and meanings. Not only do
museums lack the resources to obtain the physical objects, but they also will never be able to
obtain a complete picture of the culture and peoples because of the social interactions and
information. Representations in museums are always fragmented due to what is being displayed,
or better yet, what is not displayed, both in regards to physical objects and social information.

Additionally, location limits representation from being fully accurate and authentic. Similar to
fragmentation, location restricts museums from being complete, and therefore, hinders full
accurateness and authenticity. “Although all representations are “partial truths” (Clifford, 1996),
they are always “positional truths” (Abu-Lughod, 1991)” (Desai, pp.1-2, 2000). Because we are
not in the culture’s location and same position as the peoples being represented, we can never
have a completely accurate or authentic experience. We are limited by our location and our
position (Alcoff, 1991; Desai, 2000).

Ultimately, while a degree of accurateness and authenticity are possible to obtain, complete
accurateness and authenticity is impossible to reach due to numerous factors, mostly involving
the components of context. Still, the inability to obtain full accurateness and authenticity does
not mean that museums should be inaccurate or unauthentic with their representations, or
cease to display these representations at all. Certain steps and practices can be used to provide a
more accurate and more authentic representation of others, while being both informative and respectful.
CURATOR, OR CULTURAL BROKER?

“Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.” (Lavine and Karp, p. 1, 1991). Curators and museum staff, inescapably, impact the exhibitions they create (Lavine and Karp, 1991). They decide to downsize a certain element, while highlighting another; they decide to showcase one object, while leaving one in storage; and they decide to showcase the exhibition in one way, rather than another. These decisions, whether intentional or not, play a significant role in the exhibition and the interpretation of that exhibition by others, and unlike the factors involving the politics of representation, which are embedded in society and individuals and are, therefore, difficult to change, curation methods and practices can be altered and changed. By displaying an exhibition one way, the museum is hoping for a certain interpretation. And so, it is the museums responsibility to explore how these certain curatorial methods and practices affect the viewers, so that they can provide the best practice for a more accurate and more authentic experience and representation.

Elements of curation, including staging, lighting, arrangement, and labeling, cause the viewer to see the peoples and cultures in a certain way. Museums must determine whether certain curatorial methods and practices, involving these curatorial elements, lead to a particular interpretation or understanding, and also if there should be certain aspects and steps of the displaying process to ensure we have a more accurate and more authentic representation of the peoples and cultures. To understand the affect that curatorial practices and methods can have
on the viewer, let us look at a case study involving the Indiana University Art Museum, comparing two separate exhibitions: one of a Western culture and one of a non-Western culture. The images below showcase two displays at the IU Art Museum, one a display of European busts (top two pictures) and sculptures and the other a display of Melanesian wood carvings (bottom picture).
As can be seen, the displays are quite different. In the display of European pieces, each sculpture has bright lighting on it; each sculpture is placed at eye level; each sculpture can be seen as an individual piece in a cohesive collection; and each sculpture is placed on a pedestal. The layout design, arrangement and placement, lighting, and coloring all suggest that these pieces are considered “art”, perhaps so bold to say these pieces are considered “high art”. In the nonwestern display, the pieces are placed together, some even overlapping each other; there is dark lighting except for a spotlight on the pieces; the background is dark rather than light; and there is a picture, which seems to add context. It seems as though these pieces are lesser than the European sculptures simply from looking at their displays. Furthermore, the European collection is displayed as art, while arguably, the nonwestern collection is displayed as a story. The simple differences in curatorial elements create a very different exhibit and representation.

The question that prevails is: does this method of display affect the viewer’s interpretation and understanding of the two displays and therefore, consequentially, the peoples and cultures being exhibited? Additional research and studies must be conducted to determine the relationship between the curatorial methods and practices and the viewer’s interpretation and understanding. While it seems as though certain practices and methods could lead to certain interpretations or misinterpretations, we must explore whether these affects have a direct impact on the understanding and whether the relationships is one of a correlation or a causation.
Until further studies are conducted, museums should consider certain methods and approaches. Ellen Sieber, Chief Curator at the Mathers Museum of World and Culture, states that accessibility is the foremost important element to an exhibition (Sieber, 2016). By accessibility, she means that no matter how the visitor approached the exhibition, it should be understood. She mentions this often includes using moderate lighting, readable text and a layout that works no matter which direction it is used. Sieber also warns against exhibitions that make “powerful visual “statements””, stating that they can detract from the visitor’s ability to take in information and arguably can even lead to a misunderstanding of the subject being represented and displayed.

Additionally, many have argued that if possible, museums should seek help from those being represented on how they should be displayed. Cultural hybridization of curatorial practices within the museum setting allows for cross-cultural discussion and perhaps the integration of others’ input and curatorial practices into Western museums (Kreps, p. 15, 2003). Various museums have begun to use this cultural hybridization or have the input of others in their exhibitions. The Field Museum of National History in Chicago used this tactic when the museum involved the local African American community during their installment of their African collection, hoping to gain insight on their views so that the museum could display the recollection in the best way possible (Lavine and Karp, p. 7, 1991). Sieber states though, that while this option should be practiced, sometimes it cannot be due to the current state of the peoples and culture and the resources of the museum. Still, many argue that if at all possible, museums should seek guidance and help from those whose culture is being represented, not only as a best practice for representation but a sign of respect and interest.
Curation affects the representation and the interpretation and understanding of representations. Although the level of cause and effect between curatorial practices and interpretations might be unknown, there are various approaches that can be used to ensure a more accurate and more authentic experiences. These approaches represent the peoples and culture in a respectful and informative way, while also promoting a platform for the viewers for better understanding and questioning.
WHY HAVE REPRESENTATIONS OF OTHERS IN MUSEUMS?

The museum is a way for us to see objects, and through objects, people as well. James Cuno stated that “the museum is about the world”, explaining that museums allow us to become more familiar with the world, and “with familiarity comes greater understanding” (Cuno, p. 90). Museums have always been a place where we explore others in order to understand ourselves. Representations showcase not only the other peoples and culture, but also the relationship between the viewer and those being represented by highlighting and acknowledging the concept of difference (Sherman, 2008).

According to Sieber, “our society has the responsibility to see itself in a world context. Society benefits from learning about the world (including ourselves) in any way that works. Museums can offer different means of learning than other media or venues.” (Sieber, 2016). Exhibitions of others allow us to gain information about the world, ourselves and others included that is lacking in other mediums of education and exploration. Through exhibitions, visitors explore different perspectives and cultures in hopes to answer certain questions and to understand various topics on a deeper level. With this exploration comes additional questions in other areas and fields, some of which hopefully include the concept of representation and the effects of representations (Sieber, 2016).

Although a completely accurate and authentic representation of another is not obtainable, representations are still needed for a variety of reasons. These representations can provide a
platform for better understanding the world. Additionally, if successful, representations and exhibitions can open the floor for discussion and exploration of various topics, including the concept and effects of representations, both within and outside of museums. It is for these reasons why representations of others is needed within museums.
CONCLUSION

Although we can never fully achieve accurateness or authenticity while representing others, there are steps and practices that can lead to a more accurate and more authentic experience, while providing a platform for discussion of the politics of display, which hopefully creates a better understanding of both ourselves and others. According to Karp and Lavine, minimally, museums need development in three areas: “1) the strengthening of institution that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; 2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures in the United States; and 3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspective or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken.” (Karp and Lavine, p. 6, 1991). Arguably, additionally, museums need to devise a curatorial approach that will promote questioning regarding representations and displays of others, and perhaps even cause the acknowledgement of the politics of representation and its consequences.

Ultimately, “[i]t is easy enough to criticize museums for being what they are or for failing to be what one thinks they should be, and to judge from one’s own moral perspective the action and inaction of others. It is more difficult to purpose changes that are feasible, and to ground both criticism and reform in an understanding of the situation, economic foundations and sociopolitical formation of the museum to be gauged...” (Ames, 1992). It’s the museum’s decision on how to approach the politics of display and which practices to use; however,
hopefully, at a minimum, museums will “exhibit their materials respectfully and informatively” (Sieber, 2016) and attempt to also meet a high degree of accurateness and authenticity.

Furthermore, representation of others, especially nonwestern and indigenous peoples and cultures, is still needed in order for us to better understand ourselves, others and the world. Museums must not stop representing others in exhibitions because we cannot not reach full authenticity and accurateness. Instead, they must represent others in a respective and informative nature, while taking steps to move forward. If museums can execute an exhibit that has the goal of accurateness and authenticity in a respectful and informative matter, then a platform for better understanding the world and the politics of representation will be provided to the viewers.
APENDIX

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with museum curators were conducted to understand the issues museums face while representing others and the practices utilized by specific museums while doing so.

Ellen Sieber
Chief Curator
Mathers Museum of World Cultures

1. **Do you think our society has a responsibility to exhibit others and their cultures in museums?**
   **Why or why not?**
   I think our society has the responsibility to see itself in a world context. Society benefits from learning about the world (including ourselves) in any way that works. Museums can offer different means of learning than other media or venues.

2. **How, if at all, do you think the responsibility of representing others differs between art historical museums and ethnographic/anthropological museums? Does one institution bear more responsibility or do all museums share the same responsibility?**
   I believe that all museums should exhibit their materials respectfully and informatively, whatever that material represents – contemporary or ancient, near or far.

3. **There has been much debate since the creation of museums on whether items should be only exhibited with items of the same culture of whether items from various cultures can be exhibited together through a central theme (such as material, function and so forth). What is your position on this, as a curator? Do you think either approach can lead to confusion and/or misinterpretation amongst viewers?**
   Both approaches have definite value, and can be used effectively.
   Anything can lead to confusion and misinterpretation, but as long as the exhibit curators make clear their intent, they’ve done what they can.
4. Because museums often are associated with education, many viewers seem to formulate or affirm certain views on the culture based on one exhibit. Do you think this can be avoided? If so, how?

There are many ways to do this.
A) The most important approach is to avoid the authoritative voice that normalizes and homogenizes the subject. Instead of overgeneralizing (“The <culture name> people believe that mirrors steal their souls and so diligently avoid them.”), curators should relate what actual research indicates (“Elderly <culture name> tend to shun mirrors, perhaps due to beliefs about the safety of their souls, or perhaps because mirrors are associated with behaviors they consider sinful.”)
B) Another way is to simply state that one exhibition cannot possibly contain all that may be known about a particular culture, maybe asking visitors to think about how hard it would be to summarize their own culture.
C) A third way to address this potential difficulty is to include alternate views on topics, including those of culture members and various outsiders.

5. What curatorial elements (lighting, text, arrangements, staging etc.) do you find to affect the viewer’s interpretation and understanding of the exhibit? How does the Mathers Museum use these elements in your exhibitions?

The first rule is to be accessible. Moderate lighting, large enough text, readable fonts are important. (Some exhibits make powerful visual “statements” that detract from a visitor’s ability to take in information.) It also helps to know that not everyone is going to go through the exhibition in the same direction (no matter what the curator might wish!). Objects and information in one area should stand on their own, while still being part of a cohesive exhibition. No matter from whatever direction the visitor approaches the display, it can be understood.
6. Does the use of certain curatorial elements change based on content? From case studies, I have seen that often times, nonwestern and indigenous cultures are represented in a different approach from western cultures. For example, an African wooden mask collection might have darker lighting and wall colors from an impressionist painting collection. What is your position on this—do you think this is an acceptable approach or do you think it leads to misguidance? Should curatorial elements be generally the same for exhibitions?

Curatorial elements certainly can vary among exhibitions, but any form of segregation of “us” and “them” is not going to invite visitors to better understand either “them” or “us”. Visitors bring attitudes and understandings with them, and obviously this cannot be altered. Exhibition curators need to account for that, looking for ways to use visitors’ prior knowledge to lead them into the exhibit’s meaning. There are various ways of doing this; one that I think works well is to show what is shared between cultures (ideas, behaviors, tools, music, faith) and build on that to better understand differences.

7. Exhibitions are never neutral due to both our location and context—should we embrace our biasedness or try to neutralize it?

Neither exactly. Acknowledging the curators’ viewpoints is important and there are lots of ways the visitors can be reminded of the framework in which the display is created. That actually makes an exhibition more interesting, more like a story. If curators can write and plan exhibits so that they reflect the sense of discovery and excitement that the curators themselves experience in putting the exhibition together, they will acknowledge their own starting point as well as describing what they’ve learned while creating the exhibition.

8. How, if at all, do you think we can avoid misrepresentations and therefore, misunderstandings by the viewers? I read about several arguments, including “neutral” display, collaboration with the exhibited culture, amongst others. What does the Mathers Museum do to address the politics of representation?

We represent ourselves—our society—by the same means we represent others. If “we” are in the mix, it helps ground the interpretation of unfamiliar objects and ideas. We try to
represent objects from any culture from the perspective of a member, or members, of that
culture. That’s not always possible given our time and resource limitations.

9. Do you think we can represent others accurately and authentically, or does the politics of
representation, specifically location, context and background, disallow us from doing so? If we
can, what elements must be present?
I don’t think we can represent anyone accurately and authentically, and certainly not
completely. What we can do is shake things up a bit so visitors can consider people and
things from a slightly different perspective, so they might start asking these sorts of
questions themselves.

10. Should the peoples and cultures being represented play a role in the curatorial process? If so,
what role (consultant, guest curator, etc.)?
For this museum, it’s not so much a case of “should” as “could.” Collaborations with
communities of origin take a great deal of time and money. We welcome guest curators for
the knowledge and understanding they bring to a topic, regardless of whether they are from
such a community or not. I don’t think white middle class Midwestern Americans have a lock
on interpreting their own culture, and neither do members of any other society. We do
search for “emic” knowledge and perspectives, but we also consider it our responsibility to
offer interpretations. We try to be translators of cultures, and that requires understanding
different notions of the world.
CITATIONS

Due to the partially conceptual nature of this report, sources that were not directly cited have been included below. These sources shaped my understanding and argument indirectly, and therefore, deserve recognition.


Sieber, E. (2016, March). Politics of Representation [E-mail interview].


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