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Museum Representation: Ethnostatic Representations of Culture

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of Anthropology
2014
**Introduction**

Upon entering the atrium at the San Diego Museum of Art, visitors are presented with the option of several paths to follow. The two-story domed space separates into six lower walkways, with a looping stairway to the second floor. Each gallery within the San Diego Museum of Art is divided by temporal or spatial conditions; one section guides the viewer to an open gallery of Renaissance art, while another weaves through statuary from ancient Indo-China. While each gallery eventually leads to the others, there is a sense of stand-alone in each of the galleries. They are self-contained, self-explanatory spaces, and while they all have the common trend of displaying art, each does so on very specific and exact terms.

By developing several galleries that display different art styles from various areas and time periods, the San Diego Museum of Art adheres to what can be considered classic models of museum practices, as discussed by Svetlana Alpers in 1990. These classic models emphasize the cultivation of a high art form and displaying it for the public. These galleries act as a transformative space for visitors to enjoy the highlights of the cultures being presented, while learning the cultural values, practices, and religious associations of the objects presented through curatorial comments (Alpers1990, Bennet1999, Karp1990).

Though there are many positive intentions with this model of museum, can the theoretical models behind the classic museum disserve cultures that are presented? My intention with this paper is to examine and critique museum theory in the context of the representation of Mesoamerican cultures to determine if that is the
case. Museums act as geo-political agents with an authoritative voice on the validation or refutation of a specific culture, informing the general public on the significance of cultural objects in relation to the global community. By examining theoretical models that underlie the structure of exhibitions, my research will demonstrate that these models reinforce negative connotations of Mesoamerican cultures. I will explain the process by which knowledge is produced and articulated by museum models, and how this knowledge is influenced by the intention of the space and the perception of the viewer. Through these examinations, I will question the manner in which art, artifact, and commodity impact the articulation of a culture within the museum, and the agency attributed to these objects within the museum space
Literary Review

*Classic Museum*

A museum is defined as a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of the society and of its development, open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits material evidence of people and their environment for the purposes of study, education, and enjoyment (Giorgi2008). In essence, museums are the treasure trove of the human race. Inside the walls of a museum, the physical remains of human memories, culture, and hopes persevere despite external political conflicts and nation building.

Collections in antiquity originated in tombs, such as in those societies which chose to bury an individual with prized possessions to assist them in the afterlife, or to honor gods (Janson1986). In a similar fashion, temples or religious centers would cultivate tributes to the gods to enhance the space and cultivate a divine aura. Art collection for the cultivation of status appeared in the Hellenistic era, as the wealthy elite began to surround themselves with collections to enhance space, and potentially their social status (Kleiner2004). When the Romans conquered the Greeks, art was looted to bring back to Rome and produce replicas for the wealthy elite in Rome (Janson1986).

Such works were housed in public areas, which began to be erected by the Roman emperors as a commissioned space to celebrate the triumphs of Rome and please the people (Janson1986, Kleiner2004, Giorgi2008). Here we can begin to see the social role and power that these objects created for the cultures presented, as well as
the purpose and intention of educating the masses. A second wave of public space used as a means of education and power came through the Churches, which were spread throughout Europe beginning in the Middle Age (Frisch1987). Using art and artifacts to impart knowledge of God and the gospel, the Church was a free public space that was intended to transport viewers into the divine (Benton2004). This use of space appears to have been effective that it lead to the Church becoming the primary benefactor of art and artifact creation through the late 1800s, in terms of sheer proportion of art and artifacts created. Thus the idea of using a public space to cultivate the tastes of the population and educate them has ancient roots, and has organically developed into the contemporary perception of the museum space.

_Critique of Museum Models_

Museum space as a means of educating and enlightening audiences came into their full magnitude during the Enlightenment period in Europe (Preziosi2009a). Formulating a basis for aesthetic evaluations in judgments, the dialogue between Kant and Hegel set the stage for lasting aesthetic evaluations for objects of material culture. While Kant argued that sensory knowledge has an independent perfection that was comparable to logic and reason, Hegel emphasized the centrality of symbolism and the representation of emotions over the assessment of beauty (Kant2009, Hegel2009) . From a contemporary anthropological analysis, these perspectives can be loosely redefined as a culturally relative approach for Kant, and an essentialist approach for Hegel.
Within the museum context, and the resulting development of aesthetic evaluations for objects of material culture, Hegel’s approach has been widely accepted. Thus objects from other cultures have been presented to museum audiences as an evolutionary progression towards Eurocentric cultural models (Preziosi2003, Jenkins1990). Therefore, the general perception of cultural studies appears to have been that a culture could be understood if objects related to that group were collected, presented, and removed from their original context (Jenkins1990:243). Considering the significance and discovery of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in this era, the utilization of the epistemological and methodological framework for an evolutionary basis for culture seems plausible. The problem arises as academic models have shifted to incorporate cultural models outside of a Eurocentric perspective that have not yet been embraced by most museum collections.

From the Enlightenment models, which presented Eurocentric culture as a pinnacle of human achievement, museum space became a space to enact cultural dominance and power (Bennett1999:333). Rooted in a colonial perspective, the Exhibitionary complex, as described by Tony Bennett, serves to reinforce and validate the supremacy of Eurocentric ideals of cultural values. Thus the placement of objects within a highly curated space divorces an object from its originating culture, and forces the object to possess the cultural values and traits of the culture displaying it. More than that, by gaining the perception of dominance over other cultures, Eurocentric perspective and models emerged as the authoritative voice for the history of humanity (Preziosi2003).
If the exhibition or museum space becomes the authoritative voice on the development of culture, staging a formal beginning and perceived hallmark end, then how do audiences interact with this space? How is meaning conveyed? Ivan Karp questions the role and background of museums, and the manner in which exhibitions convey cultural meaning, and in particular, the audience’s reaction to those exhibition spaces (Karp1990b). By this, he is examining with what aspects or associations the audience come into the exhibition space, and how is that information either reinforced or corrected. Karp is acknowledging that audiences coming into an exhibition space or museum possess only the knowledge they may have developed outside the exhibition, or the information presented within – which is largely insufficient for full comprehension (Karp1990a:22).

More troubling is the role museum space plays as the knowledge-producing center that informs audiences before they even enter the museum space (Preziosi2009d, Jones1993, Jenkins1990, Karp1990b). What methods do museums use to create these dialogues for objects? One trait that Svetlana Alpers examined is the museum effect on physical objects of culture, or objects that are considered “primitive” art. She highlighted the manner in which the placement of objects within the art museum contexts transforms the objects from material culture to art – meant to be displayed and appreciated (Alpers1990:27). Tied in with the association of wonder, presenting an object without its cultural context forces the audience to re-examine an object, and develop new contextual associations for it (Dean2006).
Another model museums use to create and generate knowledge on other cultures is to create an ethno-static perception. By positioning other cultures as being trapped in the past, museum models continue to reinforce perceptions of cultural classification and evolution (Jenkins 1990). Through her critique of the exhibition *Primitivism*, Anna Laura Jones highlights some of the resilient themes in the presentation of material cultural objects from other people in Eurocentric museum models, with a particular emphasis on the notion of the “timeless tribal styles” (Jones 1993:208; Kasfir 1992).

Miriam Kahn asserts that a museum draws its authoritative power from the inclusion of certain objects, and the exclusion of others (Kahn 1995). By simply positioning some objects as being worthy of consideration and acceptance as art, while other objects are dismissed, arbitrary models of authentic are perpetuated (Tussey 2013, Kasfir 1999, Dean 2006). Moreover, by removing an object from its cultural context, the museum space creates a Foucauldian *heterotopia*, or a space with no syntax (Kahn 1995:326; Dean 2006). Again, this leads audiences to develop a context based on their own experiences and cultural perspective, leading to the distribution of knowledge that is Eurocentric.

From these critiques of museum models, I have cultivated an approach for the examination of how culture is displayed in the museum. For the example following, I will be looking at each exhibition through the lens of the curator, or the *intention*; the visitor, or the *perceived*; and in terms of the production of knowledge, or the *articulation*. Additionally, I will be examining the power structures formed by these
three participants in the museum setting as they shapes overall picture of the museum as a center for cultural production. The perspective offered by each of these agents contributes overall to the cultivation of models of culture, and of cultural understanding within this space.

When I interned with the Albany Institute of History and Art in the fall of 2013, I assisted with the development of a contemporary art exhibition. The first task Tammis Groft, the curator, settled on was determining the tone. She chose to make it **Big and Bold**, selecting works from the archives that fit this description. From there, she and I collaborated on the labels to educate the viewer on the works, or to develop the *production and articulation of knowledge* for the exhibition. After carefully examining the works in several locations, Groft determined the spatial layout of the objects, and developed a physical *presentation* of the cultural objects. Throughout this process, she orchestrated the flow of the exhibition space and formulated a pattern for guiding viewers through the space, then reworked the labels to follow. Thus Groft’s role as a curator was to develop the space with the *intention* to craft an exhibition that engaged the viewer, showcased the new gallery addition for the Albany Institute of History and Art, and allowed viewers to occupy this new space and learn from the objects to develop a better perspective of the little seen abstract side of the Institute.

On the evening before the show was opened, a small group was invited to a pre-event reception. These viewers observed the contemporary works, so distinct from the rest of the museum’s collections, and reflected upon the wall text. The conversations between the participants indicated an interest in the new perspectives, and an
engagement with the works, although not always in the manner that Groft nor I had
directly intended. The central work, a piece by Colin Boyd called *American Bison* was
intended to echo the decay and destruction of the American bison through the massive
over-hunting throughout and country and reflect on the waste an opulence of American
consumers. The work is a skeleton constructed of industrial debris, powered by an up-
cycled motor to mimic a bison in motion. While our curatorial intention was reflective,
viewers seemed more fascinated by the development process than potential intellectual
engagement with contemporary issues. Thus the *perception* of the installation was
more focused on the incredulity at the use of particular materials, and the interaction
between the viewer and the objects.

The exhibition was intended, and did succeed in some measure, to *articulate* the
social perception of the Albany Institute of History and Art as a thriving center for
artistic prediction rather than an outdated historical museum, and to situate some of
the artists within the landscape of contemporary art in the Hudson Valley.

*Art/Artifact/Commodity*

When museums assign labels, the assumed perspectives shift on an object and
what it is shown to represent. Objects that hold the same position, shape, medium, and
temporal origination can be assigned different labels. In order for some cultural objects
to be considered art, a set of aesthetic models are established that designate other
cultural objects as commodities, or a stylistic hybridization that is produced for an
external art market (Phillips 1999, Steiner 1999). The aesthetic models orient
themselves to reflect perceptions of either authentically primitive works, or are based on the hierarchy of Eurocentric models for aesthetic evaluation (Antiff 2003, Chibnik 2006, Kasfir 1992, Tussey 2013) Commodities have the perception of being crude or cheaply produced (Kasfir 1999).

A crucial aspect to the agencies at play within the museum space and dialogue is the Gaze. Laura Mulvey outlined a two sided process in film in which the viewer essentially sees women in cinema in one of two ways: a threat to masculinity, or as a sexualized object (Mulvey 1975). The dialogue that emerges from that act of viewing women as commodities has evolved and reshaped in nearly forty years; yet within the museum space, the theory of the Gaze gives agency to the audience to form assumptions and project meaning onto objects.

Consider the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, a widely acclaimed feminist artist. Throughout her career, she stood by her oversized flower paintings as they were interpreted as female genitalia and the empowerment of women without ever describing the flowers as such – instead largely referring to them in the context of exposing beauty (Lisle 1997). These associations were cultivated based on the perception of the audience.

Margaret Olin describes the gaze as “a struggle: one gets to look and be the master of the gaze; the other (or Other) is looked at...therefore the gaze colors the relations between the majority and the minority” (Olin 2003:325). Fundamentally, that is the root of power relations within the museum context – the unequal balance that
transpires, leaving objects stripped of cultural identity and re-evaluated in new and foreign terms.

Why would one object from a Mesoamerican site be determined as art, while the vase found three feet away is considered an artifact? Arbitrary assignments of labels lead to confusion on a set system of principles and classification (Dean 2006). The intention of art aesthetics is to inform the viewer or historian on the social, religious, and political agents in a time period, whereas an artifact gives evidence to everyday life. Where does one label end, and the other begin?

Heinrich Wölfflin contrasted stylistic changes between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, which resonate in the discussion for art/artifact/commodity. He roots style in five distinct, opposing dichotomies, which he uses not to show the development of artistic endeavors precisely, but instead as the continuity between basic elements of artistic pursuits that unify stylistic periods. Wölfflin’s five elements are as follows.

1. **Liner Style/ Painterly Style:** the articulation of depth in an art object. Linear style is characterized by the separation of subjects based in outlines and surfaces, or a relatively shallow field; painterly style situates subjects in space relative to the viewer.

2. **Plane Depth / Recession Depth:** the situation of the subject in spatial development. Plane depth places all subjects in a single space at the same distance in the work relative to the viewer; recession depth places subjects at
various distances from the viewer, and includes the reduction of size and
shift in levels to indicate spatial awareness.

3. Closed / Open Form: whether the field of view is self contained, or does not
extend beyond the boundaries of the work, or whether the view appears to
extend beyond the boundaries of the work.

4. Multiplicity / Unity: the determination of thematic elements from several
overlapping, to a single unified scene.

5. Absolute Clarity / Relative Clarity: the emphasis is on either the subject and
the scene, or the rendering of the scene with a lack of purpose. Thus, the
difference between an object meant to convey a story, or an object designed
to be decorative.

Wölflin 1922:14-16

These characteristics as laid out by Wölflin are pertinent to the study outlined
because they present one influential set of criteria for an art or artifact object to possess
to and considered that respective label (Preziosi 2009c, Kasfir 1992, Jones 1993, Antiff
2003). Objects that fall into the secondary category are overwhelmingly considered to
be less advanced, and thus labeled as a commodity object, and social perceived to be
trapped within the ethno static past (Kahn 1995, Kasfir 1999).

As I will show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of
Natural History, spindle whorls are displayed as both art and artifacts (AMNH 2.2014;
MMA 2.2014). One could argue that the contextualization raises an object for
consideration as art, in the manner of Marcel Duchamp’s tongue-in-cheek Fountain. Yet
Unlike Duchamp’s work, the objects displayed are not satirical. These objects were developed for a purpose: they educate the viewer on daily activities, inform on social roles – and the context of their presentation can shape contrasting labels of what matters for social reconstruction of societies. The classification of certain objects being classified as high art, while other are considered artifacts, creates arbitrary lines for the consideration of objects. In particular, objects that are determined to fulfill neither of these roles are assigned the title of commodity. Once classified as a commodity, an object loses its social value and agency; commodities are not displayed in museums, but instead associated with cheaply produced trinkets, and thus hold less value and significance.

As these conflicting models of art and artifact trickle into tourist or commodity art, stereotypes of authenticity are created and perpetuated which have no resonance with cultural significance or history; thus the culture production that occurs within the museum space informs the performance of culture in the real world for tourists, which in affects the tourist art market (Phillips 1999, Little 2004, Tussey 2013). Thus the models of representation within the museum context directly impact the global perception of Mesoamerican societies, creating a static model for cultural authenticity and an enforced identity.

The purpose behind an object is also re-evaluated when it is removed from its original context. With every step away from its original purpose, an object begins to lose it cultural identity and value, and become a commoditized object (Dean 2006). First it is sold to a buyer, who determines its authentic qualities, before it is passed on to a
museum, where it begins to appropriate connotations, and finally ends up framed on a
wall with a bland label explaining its cultural significance (Kasfir 1999). Eurocentric
labels categorize items as one type or another, but “by assigning everything under one
classificatory and inevitably dismissive label, Western art museums and galleries cause
all other unassigned forms to become inferior” (Kasfir 1999). Western modes of
classification permit information to fall between the cracks, and lose the ability to
evaluate and study a society with all of its cultural realities; the art historians is instead
forced to use the existing materials to create a partial picture.

Art’s agency stems from its social role. As discussed earlier, art fulfills the role of
the treasure of human production, informing the viewer of the religious and social
associations of a particular group. The term “art” at its application to an object implies
that the object embodies culture at its perceived highest form, produced for, and by,
the wealthy elite (Alpers 1990:26, Dean 2006) Thus theoretically, an art object allows
the viewer to determine what a cultural group places as its highest social rank. Art
production is expensive, and most societies use art as a means of conveying to others
the owner’s social rank and status. Therefore, academics have projected that art
objects outside that sphere of influence must hold the same social and political
connotations.

To describe the social effect of art, Alfred Gell created a system of interacting
elements: the index, or the material entities that motivate abductive inferences and
cognitive interpretations; the artist, who assumes causal responsibility for the existence
and characteristics of the index; the recipients, over whom indexes exert social agency,
or who exert agency through the index; and prototypes, which are entities held to be represented in the index, often through symbolism (Gell 1998). By contrast, an artifact’s agency stems from the scientific data that support the hypothesized authenticity of the object - an artifact must be proven to have historical connotation and purpose to be on display. Moreover, an artifact needs to be an outstanding example of its genre to be displayed in the museum context (Alpers 1990, Jenkins 1990).

The relegation of objects into three classifications of art, artifact, and commodity centers geo-political knowledge production hegemony in Western based thinking, perpetuating colonial models into the contemporary age.

**Subaltern Representation**

Historically, culture has been evaluated on a sliding scale of importance. On one hand, classic cultures and civilizations have been idealized, such as Greece and Egypt, while on the other hand, New World civilizations are considered lesser. The models perpetuated from cultural production reinforce this sliding scale of significance, centering Old World, or Western, civilization as the zenith of cultural models and articulation (Stam 1995).

Antonio Gramsci defined cultural hegemony as the social elite’s control over a population that is culturally diverse, in that the elite ruling class manipulated lower rungs of the social ladder to enforce a particular worldview (Crehan 2002). For the purposes here outlined, Eurocentric cultural hegemony is defined by the cultural capital
that has developed around a rubric of classic societies, from Egypt to Rome to Imperial
Britain, and the social values associated in general with a Judeo-Christian framework.

Associated with this model of cultural hegemony is the idea of Eurocentric
aesthetic systems, which draws from the social orientation discussed above to develop a
set of principles for the discussion and labeling of art, artifacts, and commodity outlined
here (Hegel 2009, Kant 2009, Gombrich 2009, Preziosi 2009). These aesthetic
evaluations and cultural associations can no longer be used to discuss objects from
Mesoamerica, particularly in reference to the museum context, as it is these models
that have led to problems of representation for Mesoamerican cultures.

On a geopolitical level, representation informs the global community on the role
and agency that a culture should be afforded (Spivak 1988, Rodriguez 2001, Stam 1995).
The shifting and arbitrary labels assigned to the objects produced by these cultural
groups, whether they are contemporary or ancient, reinforce the idea that Western
culture has a responsibility to foster, in the colonial sense outlined above, and bring
these cultural groups and bring them to the modern era. In the most basic sense,
stripping a community of the agency to perpetuate representation and cultural identity
robs them of any potential for cultural growth (Quijano 2000).
Data and Discussion

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is recognized internationally as one of the most prestigious museums. Art within those walls is granted by acceptance the status of high art, reflecting the aura of space in which it is housed (Alpers 1990). The appeal of the art museum as a space for first encounters stems from the rigidity and control over objects within that space (Karp 1990a). By conforming to ideals laid out in art historical texts, specific objects that reflect Eurocentric ideals of beauty and taste can be showcased as a way to ease the viewer into an alien perspective or space. The art museum is a comforting, familiar place to experience a sample of Otherness while still in close proximity to the comfort and familiarity of Western civilization (Bennett 1999, Karp 1990, Jones 1993).

The main hall is an open gallery with exhibitions on either side, a huge space that echoes the architecture of Gothic cathedrals. To get to the Mesoamerican collections, a visitor needs to travel through the airy bright hall of Hellenistic statues, and then through either the Pacific Islands collection or the African collection. If the former path is selected, the viewer travels from the bright white light in the Hellenistic sculptures to the bright, inviting room with vast installations from the Pacific Islands and Oceania, before entering the darker, almost claustrophobic rooms of American Indians.

Dramatically the colors and lights shift from clean, fresh, and natural lighting to harsh artificial light and a sandy color scheme. Just the shift in lighting indicates to the observer that they have entered a new and unfamiliar space, and to anticipate a shift in
the objects presented. Where in the previous spaces, objects were viewed in the round and elevated about the viewer, these objects are smaller and placed together in cases, organized either by culture or material. The shift in emphasis from an individual piece being worthy of undivided attention to the general glance of a grouping indicates the value and intended attention to be placed on each object (Alpers 1990, Karp 1990b, Kasfir 1992).

The information available on labels and in gallery texts is prolific in other exhibitions of the Met, yet in the Mesoamerican section, scant information can be discovered. The organization of objects in the Mesoamerican exhibition at the Met is best classified as a group display - groups of objects are displayed together, unified by their appearance, function, or producing culture, with little interpretive data for the viewer to engage with (Giorgi 2008). While the layout encourages visitors to circulate among the objects, with generous spacing between cases, and sculptures available to be viewed in the round, a slight feeling of neglect seems to permeate the space and infected tone of the exhibition.

Within the aforementioned cases, small ceramic objects are displayed. One of these objects is a reddish-brown spindle whorl (MMA 2.2014, Figure One). Circling the spindle whorl in five levels are inscribed designs. The central two layers are simple lines, followed by a line of circles. Then a repeating geometric swirl motif comprises the largest layer, and finally a rectangular geometric pattern.

Information for the objects is not readily available for the audience at the museum; however, with a bit of research the accession information can be located at
the Met’s website. The accession information dates the objects between the 10th and 16th century, from the joint region Mexico/Mesoamerica and a cultural association as Mexican. What typically occurs at the time of an object’s accession is a full appraisal of the work, and if necessary, repairs that would include repairing small cracks, fissures, and other refurbishments (MFA Boston 11.2013). It seems to me that this is the moment an object is stripped of its identity and recontextualized as an art object, as the object is undergoing a physical transformation to adhere to the art museum’s determinations for an idealized authentic culture.

This particular appraisal identified the spindle whorl as ceramic, measured to have a diameter of 2-9/32 inches, and classified as an ‘implement’. Accession records also include the provenance of the work, which in this case mentions the previous collection (Louis Petich Collection), the length of loan to the Met (1894-1900), and the year the Met purchased the spindle whorl (1900). There is no mention of the specific culture that created it, the purpose it served, the significance of the patterns, the process of development, or even a discussion of the role that a spindle whorl had in everyday life.

The intention appears to be a discovery space, encouraging visitors to consider potential meaning and use for the object. However, the perception of the space is confusing and serves to create an Othering effect for the culture presented. Rather than the articulation of the space being an atmosphere to promote reflection and consideration, it becomes a space that reinforces colonial perspectives of
Mesoamerican culture, leaving the viewer confused about the purpose of the objects presented and the identity of the culture that created them.

The exhibition typifies with the manner in which art acts as an informant on culture. In the classic museum setting, art objects are used to fortify the public perception of the specific cultural groups and practices; the Met’s Mesoamerican art objects perpetuate a social perception of Mesoamerican art as a lesser form, stripped of cultural identity and agency (Alpers 1990). The aura produced by the Met seems to authenticate this perception, and allows models of knowledge production to shape and inform the practices within the space.

American Natural History Museum in New York City

Natural history museums are used to examine the development of the world, both culturally and naturally. Archaeological exhibitions within this space are used to showcase objects that typify a culture in a particular moment of historical significance. In essence a culture is frozen and static in these spaces, examined under the scientific and historical lens (Jenkins 1990). Even more than at the art museum, patrons of these exhibits are students interested in developing a broader and deeper knowledge about the particular historical moment captured. While primarily the role of these spaces is to educate, natural history museums act also as a transformative experience, shifting the audience to the role of an archaeologist in negotiating the objects as representations of a culture, and the development of a perception that arises from this (Karp 1990c).
This transformative experience can be viewed as a first encounter with a new culture, because of the process of emergence that tends to arise out of the curatorial practices at play in natural history museums. Collections of objects tend to be organized in a manner that informs the viewer on the purpose and significance of the objects, and the viewer is invited to actively engage with comparisons between objects (Jenkins 1990).

At the American Natural History Museum in New York City, the audience is immersed in total darkness, with only the objects lit dramatically, highlighting the collection and bestowing objects with the audience’s focus. Objects in the Mesoamerica section were grouped based on the culture of origin, which was quickly recognizable from the color of the backdrop assigned to specific cultures, and then by the items’ intended purpose. Throughout the hall there are replicas of statues and tombs to give the viewer context of the pieces, and the hall ends in a replica of an archeological site. Each object and section was clearly labeled and categorized for the viewer to learn, and experience a comparative process for these objects.

This context as a museum setting allows the viewer to become the participant and operate within the archaeological process of identifying, assigning, and categorizing each object as an artifact. Viewers experience the process of determining the purpose, and connecting the cultural aspects with the physical evidence present to cultivate an idea of nature, all without having extensive training or even a background in anthropology, within the parameters dictated by the museum.
As seen in natural history museums, artifacts give historical and cultural perspective on a society to a viewer, functioning as an academic reference. From these works one can infer information about a culture or society’s values and customs. The rationale behind the artifact is based on the authenticity of an object, in how it relates to the society as a reflection of its values.

In Case 13:4, which contains Maya ceramics, a spindle whorl that is remarkably similar to the spindle whorl at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is displayed (AMNH 2.14). Here the spindle whorl has a slightly more ornate design, with a central flower motif framed by similar swirling geometric patterns. The object is clearly labeled, with the country of origin as Mexico, the period as Postclassic with a rough date of 1300-1500, and determined to be clay or terra cotta.

Displayed among other ceramic objects from roughly the same era and area, the spindle whorl is intended to construct a perception of everyday life for the Postclassic Maya. The information presented along with this spindle whorl is cultivated from a team of anthropologists and archaeologists, along with data collected at the dig site. (AMNH 2.14, Figure Two) Thus the spindle whorl here acts as an educational tool, rather than a venerated art object. Yet it is still being displayed in a highly curated, controlled manner that associates this particular spindle whorl as having more authenticity than others as a historical object.

The American Museum of Natural History in New York’s Mesoamerican exhibition capitalizes on the viewers’ assumed naivety on Mesoamerican culture, and develops a didactic space for viewers to negotiate. The intention is to guide the viewer
into an educational first-encounter experience with the objects and cultures presented; the lighting of the gallery almost eradicates the presence of the visitors, isolating them in the darkness to contemplate the objects in the light. The exhibition organizes artifacts in cases by culture and purpose. Each culture presented is assigned a different color for their exhibition cases, while substantial labels and notes to educate the viewer on the objects presented accompany every case. The *perception* therefore is of a highly informative space that educates the viewer on the history and beliefs of the cultures presented.

Yet the *articulation* contrasts with this. The exhibition presents the viewer with the idea of a first encounter, the discovery and categorization of a culture being reduced to object labels. The exhibition is a static portrayal of the cultures presented, skirtng over conquest and internal conflicts, ignoring innovation or cultural initiative in a struggle to present a single oversimplified culture in a highly diverse region. Culture is homogenized in this exhibition in an attempt to create an idea of pervasive unit, rather than recognize new world models of culture and power.

Artifacts are here used as instruments to enhance the *intention* and *articulation* of the exhibition, and the models of knowledge production behind each. The manner in which the artifacts are used then impacts the *perception* of the cultures presented, and continue to perpetuate the models of thinking that shaped the exhibitions in the first place.
The Spindle Whorl
At both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Natural History Museum, spindle whorls that appear topically to be remarkably similar are displayed as two very different kinds of object. Are spindle whorls art objects, or are they artifacts? At the Met, the spindle whorl was isolated from its cultural context, causing the audience to see it as an example of superb craftsmanship. After all, when visiting the Met, audiences encounter the pinnacle of human achievement. It seems probable and self-explanatory that objects presented within the Mesoamerican context would be considered by art historians as the on-par counterparts to objects that conform to Eurocentric artistic ideals.

While the American Museum of Natural History chose to display the spindle whorl among other ceramics with similar utilitarian purposes, the audience is still presented with the perception that the characteristics embodied here are authentic Postclassic Maya characteristics, and by extension objects that do not adhere to this authentic stereotype have no historical or cultural value.

Beyond the spindle whorls exhibited within either museum are the vast stores of collections that both contain. Searching online databases to delve deeper into the history and background of each spindle whorl, I discovered the variety and sheer quantity of spindle whorls in storage. Why are certain characteristics prized in each area, and how did the curators determine which spindle whorls embodied the idealization of these cultures?

Models of culture are created and perpetuated within the museum space; thus cultural production is here defined as the performance of a culture in society and the
cultural generalizations that occur from those performances (Little 2004). The objects associated as art and artifact inform the production of levels of culture. Culture production is different from knowledge production, in that knowledge production is an intentional and deliberate effort to create and distribute particular cultural models that are consistent and perpetual; cultural production is often arbitrary and random in the assignment of object labels (Chibnik 2006, Dean 2006, Kasfir 1992). When objects are labeled and categorized, the object performs culture within a tightly curated space.

Lines are drawn to indicate what can be considered the highest level of production in a culture, and what traits embody that level. The cultivation of aesthetics based on this performance informs structures that surround these aesthetic evaluations, and assign value and cultural capital to objects. The assignment of titles to objects is the first step in the construction of an external consumer market, which informs the consumer of the validity and authenticity of an object.
Breaking the Models

Laying out the problems with museum exhibition focus is one process; the next step will be determining and outlining stronger processes and models for the museum space to re-emerge as an informative knowledge production center. International movements are under way to improve museum models, and to counterbalance the effects these models have had on knowledge distribution (Clifford 1997; Clifford 1986, MacDonald 1992, Ardren 2002).

As a response to museum representations of ethno static models, regional museums have begun to knot closer ties with the indigenous people they represent (Jones 1993:212) By blending together historical objects to cultivate a tribal history in conjunction with contemporary art that engages with political issues, academics have begun the shift towards the inclusion of new aesthetic interpretations is beginning to emerge (Clifford 1986, Jones 1993). James Clifford discusses one example of this in “Museums as Contact Zones” where he examines the reaction of the Portland Museum of Art to the tribal leaders input on artifacts presented (Clifford 1997). He crafts together the story-telling narrative, melding the historical and tribal past with the engagement of contemporary political issues. Recognizing within the display the role an object has beyond its position for beauty on a pedestal begins to shape a new methodological approach for the display of ethnographic objects without divorcing them from cultural context (Clifford 1997, Kasfir 1999, Dean 2006).

The former curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, George MacDonald, discusses similar struggles within his museum context, and trying to strike a didactic
balance between the perceptions of the viewers, engagement of issues, and the
cultivation of space that is reflective of cultural values and traits (Macdonald 1992). This
engagement with political issues while still maintaining the goal of the museums as
education space is imperative; the curation of space is a delicate blend of displaying
meaningful information without alienating either the cultural background of the object
or the viewer’s interest (AIHA:9.13, Clifford:1986).

In the Mexican state of Oaxaca, community museums have begun to pop up as a
reaction to the national property laws in Mexico (Morales 1995). The national
appropriation of cultural heritage items leaves smaller communities vulnerable; while
there have been legislative moves to protect the rights of small communities, there has
yet to be a broader application protecting indigenous culture as a whole (Camerena
2006). Therefore the community museums of Oaxaca operate as a rallying point for the
protection and perpetuation of cultural heritage, representative leadership, and
community.

These aspects of community museums foster a sense of community-level pride
in cultural patrimony (Erikson 1996). While these spaces act as a mobilization for
recognition, the forms of culture displayed are significant, because the objects are
selected by the community, and within the community (Ardren 2002). Unlike the
Colonial Williamsburg Living Museum model in the United States, an effort is made in
community museums to deliberately not perform culture – the emphasis is in educating
the regional community, and frequently a broader community as well – on the cultural
The Smithsonian Institute funded a fellowship in Museum Practice for Teresa Morales to explore the effect by community museums in depth (Morales 1995). Recognition of such an institution suggests that broader applications of the models presented within these spaces may eventually find their way to larger museum exhibitions.
Further Research Goals

In dialogue with the models presented in the last section, further research will need to examine stronger processes and models for the museum space, with particular emphasis on the development of an interactive, didactic space that informs viewers without engaging in a first-encounter experience. Rather than emphasizing the differences or the Other in the exhibition space, the models I am currently researching will inform on the social role and significance of objects and rituals in conjunction with a culture. One main aspect of this will be focusing the viewer on the contemplative aspect of display, rather than a strict curatorial demand.

An important piece of this will be the reconfiguration of curatorial texts and museum education programs. My intention moving forward is to reconsider these texts to focus on an examination of the manner in which an object is utilized in a society, rather than focusing on objects as a symbol or emblem of a social group. Currently my research in the Albany Institute of History and Art involves working with elementary aged students to create Ushapti figures (AIHA 9.2014). This program is designed to bring the relevance of the Ushapti in the gallery to the everyday life of the students. As I instruct the students on how to create their own Ushapti, I encourage students to consider the roles their Ushapti would have. The dialogue in the gallery focuses on the Ushapti as servants, carrying out menial tasks in the afterlife. Asking students to consider what their everyday mundane tasks are allows them to consider their own world, and contrast this with Ancient Egypt. Imagining themselves in the context presented gives them a new perspective on the roles and significance of the
untouchable objects in the gallery. The goal of this is to use the Ushapti they create make the gallery object approachable and relatable. Young adults learning their cultural history should not come into a museum or academic space and learn the primitive manner in which their forbears created art. Instead, education needs to embrace the language and history of native populations rather than suppress or rewrite cultural narratives to operate within a different framework of expectations and values.

Carolyn Dean reflects on the consequences of appointing this problematic term to objects in her article “The Trouble with (the term) Art”. She asserts that the allocation of the title art reinforces colonial attitudes that upon imperial expansion and acquisition, the dominant culture’s aesthetic judgment and rationales overrule any potential indigenous associations. Thus the discourse surrounding the discussion of non-Eurocentric art objects is normalized and homogenized by acquisition to become something that is recognizable as an art object. The attempt to rationalize an object created without the singular purpose as art leads to misunderstanding and a misconstrued perspective of said objects (Dean 2006) Dean proposes in her article the possibility of applying local vernacular to describe an object over the application of the term art.

While all can concur that “art” is an ambiguous terms with multifarious and inconsistent meanings, a surprisingly small number of art historians in the so-called AOA fields (Africa, Oceania, Americas), those fields focused on cultures most commonly labeled “primitive,” face this problem head on...In place of “art” we might consider the use of
indigenous terms, categories, and even epistemologies where they can be recovered…”

(Dean2006:25,31)

Applying a vernacular approach to object labeling could extend beyond the classification of type of object, and expand into the language that is used to construct and discuss these objects. Berlin and Kay conducted a study in 1969 that demonstrated how color classifications are innately programmed in the human mind, and that there are universal basic color terms across all languages (Berlin 1969). The amount of data collected after to dispute and give authority to these claims determined that all languages have between four and eleven basic color terms. (Berlin 1969, Regier 2005)

Transitioning this understanding of color terminology out of a strictly academic context, where it is intended to inform on universal trends in cognitive processes, and applying it within the museum context would enrich the contextual and cultural representations that are at place in an exhibition. One of the primary issues with Mesoamerican representations within the Eurocentric museum include the inability to accurately discuss an object, and appointing terminology that inevitably distances the object from its home culture (Berlin 1969, Dean 2006). By taking into consideration folk classifications for color, and the associations of a culture’s color terms and descriptors, a new comprehensive approach to the creation and distribution of knowledge can be undertaken.

The utilization of language within the politics of display works as either an inclusive or exclusive method. By developing a methodological approach to the
incorporation of indigenous terminology, as well as the culturally significant descriptors, new theoretical models for the descriptions of Mesoamerican objects can be better discussed in both academic and non-academic contexts.

The language art historians use to discuss objects is very topical and superficial. It serves to examine and explore deeper meanings of surface intentions, seeking significance and symbolism as can be inferred from European based aesthetic systems (Kleiner 2004, Janson 1986, Preziosi 2009a). By directly ignoring and incidentally overlooking the significance of context for Mesoamerican objects in the museum, viewers are unable to attain the true meaning and cultural significance of an object.

The objects presented in the museum setting are conceived of as a narrative history, whether that be through ritual, religion, or through the recording of historical events. Expressing these histories and narratives in the native manner is essential to the accurate development of an internal academic dialogue, as well as the manner in which information is handed out to the general public.

Another aspect of research I intend to engage in promotes an interdisciplinary approach to the education and knowledge production models in the museum. Many of the current models in place stem from the knowledge distributed on a particular object being from an isolated disciplinary approach, weakening the overall knowledge production of a culture. The research I conducted in my undergraduate studies focused on creating a clinical diagnostic chart for objects, with the dual purpose of continued conservation of cultural heritage, and a more detailed history of an object (CISA3
Interactive displays that can incorporate new technology and interdisciplinary approaches to an object’s history will forge a new model for representation. Additionally such displays allows reconstruction of archaeological sites to be developed and worked within, potentially permitting objects to be viewed with the intention and placement, rather than as divorced objects on display.

In order to cultivate a new process of object discussion, I will need to conduct further research on the development of a self-contained aesthetic model. Western based models of aesthetic theory and systems are inapplicable to objects from Mesoamerica. To better develop self-sufficient models, I plan to carry out research that focuses on the historical development of aesthetic models in Western societies, and create a methodological approach for the development of an internal aesthetic system for a particular Mesoamerican system. This self-sufficient model will draw from iconographic data, figure rendering, and existing texts.

Grounding these results as the responsibility of the museum exhibition can seem a bit far-fetched, but the role of the museum, as discussed and outlined earlier, is to inform the viewer of the cultural values and significance of objects. Museums are responsible for the cultivation of knowledge on these cultural groups, and the manner in which representation is displayed directly impacts the production and distribution of knowledge. As the producers of knowledge, museums need to strive to create and model the most accurate and effective knowledge possible. The museum is a space for articulation and growth; contemporary exhibitions of Mesoamerican objects should be
emphasizing this role, rather than using the space to reinforce colonial models of
hegemonic power.

Furthermore, the continuation of the museum in its current role as the center of
knowledge production hinges on the adaptation to new models of cultural identity and
knowledge dissemination. The next generation of museum visitors will have technology
at their fingertips to generate supporting or contrasting data to the exhibitions
presented. The perpetuation of Mesoamerican cultures as static will sink, as will the
reputation of museums that continue to perpetuate outdated models of
thinking. Beyond the social responsibility of the museum to create better models, the
continued survival of the museum demands a shift in protocol.

Combating the stereotypes that museums perpetuate models of antiquated
thinking and colonial perspectives is the challenge for future museum leaders. While
the models and theoretical framework that have been laid out are still prevalent, a shift
is beginning to re-conceptualize the museum as a contact space and site for positive
cultural reinforcement.

Creating a space that reflects the cultural values, encourages community
involvement, and engages the general public may be an idealized version of an art
exhibition. However, because of the role that the formalized museum space holds in
society, it is vital to understand the hegemonic power that lies within these exhibition
spaces. Should the projection of culture as static, immobile, and trapped in the past
persist, art museums run the risk of outdating themselves and losing public interest.
Rather than using these spaces to reinforce preconceived notions of exotic other,
exhibitions need to make a shift to incorporate the fluid notion of culture as a constantly evolving entity.
Conclusion

This thesis has presented several existing theoretical models in the museums space, and their articulation in Mesoamerican exhibitions. By isolating and discussing the various aspects and curatorial practices, I have presented the different levels of agency of the intention, perception and articulation. Applying these levels of agency to the objects presented within the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, I have outlined how knowledge is produced and distributed through the objects presented. This in turn leads to the global perception of Mesoamerican cultures, based on the process of culture production within the museum, and how this impacts ideas of representation geopolitically.

While my research in this field is on-going, it is in collaboration with an international movement to reconsider the museum, and its social role in contemporary society. It is imperative that the museum adapt to the current social demands in order to survive. The processes that will arise from the research being conducted now will shape the way that cultures and society will be viewed and discussed for the next generation.
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- multiple examples of Eurocentric perspectives in aesthetic interpretation and evaluation, how this impacts global perspectives on various cultures


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**Figure One**: courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/307549?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=Spindle+Whorl&where=Mexico&pos=6

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Geography:</strong> Mexico, Mesoamerica</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Culture:</strong> Mexican</td>
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This artwork is not on display

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**Provenance**

Louis Pelch Collection, New York; before 1883, on loan to Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1894–1903

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**Figure Two**: courtesy American Museum of Natural History:
http://anthro.amnh.org/anthropology/databases/common/image_dup.cfm?catno=30%20%20%20%2F%20%20%20866

**SPINDLE WHORL**

**MEXICAN & CENTRAL AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTION**

**Catalog No:** 30 / 866

**Country:** MEXICO

**Period:** POSTCLASSIC, circa A.D. 1300 – 1500 (AZTEC)

**Material:** CLAY (TERRA COTTA)

**Dimensions:** DIA: 5.2 [in CM]

**Subject:** SPINDLE WHORL

**Acquisition Year:** 1896

**Donor:** SAVILLE, M.H.

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