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Ethics in Exhibitions: Considering Indigenous Art

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Ethics in Exhibitions: Considering Indigenous Art

Across historical epochs, artistic production has been recognized as both source and symbol of human validity and influence. Oppressed collectives of individuals have been historically divested of their art and thus of their self-concept, a pattern which continues into modernity and is currently coming under ethical consideration. The repatriation of power is a complicated concern which reveals the multifaceted functions of art as well as the often-overlooked cultural differences in conceptions of these functions, and the challenges inherent in attempting to abnegate oppression can be seen in the treatment of art objects by Indigenous Americans. Native American art distinctly illustrates the complexity of these art-world ethics, raising questions as to the structural adequacy of the contemporary encyclopedic museum as an institution for the display of these objects, and challenging the Western authority to define art through even unconsciously ethnocentric display. Through examination of the subtle political statements which underline even the most presumably simple of exhibition choices, one can see the over-simplifications inherent in Cuno's declaration that the encyclopedic museums of historically colonialist nations represent "universal aspirations" (Cuno xxxii). It can be argued that this concept of universality is an implement of homogenization, and that the structure of the encyclopedic museum enables more powerful nations to conceptualize and effectively summarize less powerful nations and minorities, frequently misrepresenting them by divesting them of complexities which are essential to humanity. While encyclopedic museums cannot be seen in black or white any more than the nations which they strive, and sometimes fail, to accurately represent, an examination of these shades of gray is crucial to the restoration of

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human rights so long denied Native American peoples. A close look at many exhibition practices for Native American art reveals the enduring legacy of European colonization in America. These issues arise primarily from the imposition of Western viewpoints on art that cannot be defined by Western standards, resulting in exhibition displays which, through cultural misunderstandings, misrepresent Native art through a visual language of inertia. By failing to communicate the complexity of this art, lost through the Western lens, encyclopedic museums display a lack of understanding which is highly detrimental, leading to simplification and the dehumanization inherent in labels such as “primitive”. Displays which are designed by Indigenous peoples and characterized by this interaction are the only ones able to represent the continuous vitality of Native art and succeed in demanding more of non-natives in terms of thought and sensitivity towards diverse conceptualizations of art and their crucial implications.

A crucial concern about the exhibition of Native American art in museums is the perpetuation of the idea that this vibrant art represents an essentially dead or dying population; These stereotypes are perpetuated when there is a lack of Indigenous participation in the curatorial decision making of an exhibition, as well as through the lack of focus on evolution and development of Native American art through the inclusion of contemporary works. Deborah Spear Moorehead, an artist from the Seaconke, Pokanoket, Wampanoag, Narragansett, Pequot, Mohawk, and Nimpuk tribal nations, “recalls being a young student in school, learning from curricula that taught her that Eastern Native Woodland peoples were extinct” (Ellman 7), and has been quoted as reflecting on the negative effect which this had on her identity. The idea of large encyclopedic museums as custodians of culture has a lengthy history; an article of 1919 in the archives of the Pennsylvania Gazette, reporting on the acquisition of hundreds of Tglinit art objects, declares that these objects “were given because the medicine men and chiefs foresee the

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extinction of native culture and want the relics preserved”. This concept of preservation divests Native Americans of their sovereignty and fails to present the whole picture, overlooking the systematic oppression which endangered Native American artistic tradition in the first place. Simultaneously, it creates a false sense of the static; people such as Marlene Johnson, a Tlingit of the T’akdeintaan clan in Alaska, believe that “ancestors’ spirits stay within any objects they owned” (Petrilla 1). This is a different way of looking at art, arguably more abstract than historical Western conceptualization, and one that should be reflected in exhibition choices. If art is living, rather than simply representing, then realism as it has been defined by the Western canon becomes meaningless and obsolete; in order for viewers to approach Native American art with the mindset to give it the respect it deserves, they must be immersed in a different culture which is active and self-defining. Such a precedent has been set by the U’Mista Cultural Centre in British Columbia, which houses potlatch art and artifacts previously seized by the Canadian government. The Centre now functions as a place to view these objects while also incorporating contemporary Kwakiutl culture; it is also a village community center, offering art and language classes. Another example can be found in the Aboriginal Art Center in Canada, which incorporates ceremony into its exhibition openings, imbuing the space where art will be shown and consequently the art itself with meaning. While certain objects might be inappropriate for exhibition to non-tribe members this decision, along with details of ceremony and the specific lighting and positioning of displayed objects, should be the choice of tribes and serve to emphasize the continuity of culture.

Display issues encompass more than choice, positioning, and lighting of art objects. Exhibitions of Native American objects often include visual and didactic material designed by non-native museum workers with the intent of conveying well-researched Native values, but

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often fall short of this aspiration. An example can be found in the inclusion of visual representations of landscape, often shown with objects in an attempt to express Indigenous values. In this example, different aspects of interpreting and considering visual art again arise; such picturesque representations of land have often been interpreted as “a pictorial discourse on power and place” and a “specifically Western way of seeing” (Ohnesorge 45). When Native Americans are represented within the landscape, they are often pictured as “part of that flora and fauna....objects within the object of the land” (Ohnesorge 48). This impression is both inherently imperialistic and a distorted misrepresentation of the crucial relationship between Native peoples and American terrain. Indigenous American art, rather, has historically reflected through use of perspective a different concept of the land, one which, according to many scholars and Native Americans, has less to do inherently with acquisition and voyeurism. This is expressed visually through the abandonment of realism as it is defined by European tradition, such as clear ground lines and perspective, and can be interpreted as conveying the idea that “culture, society, and the political body emanate from the land, a direct reversal of the Euro-Western casual chain, where the desire of the human machine is imposed upon the earth” (Ohnesorge 49). This difference in perspective accounts for vastly different methods of rendering land pictorially, and may result in many static landscape images which unconsciously hearken back to colonialist notions of territory being used in exhibitions. To define Native representations of land as “abstracted” or “unrealistic” does not reflect an inherent truth, but rather a lack of understanding arising from cultural differences and conditioned mindsets. Consequently, exhibitions incorporating depictions of land using visual material created by non-Natives may be misrepresenting Native values drastically, and unconsciously presenting an ethnocentric European view of American history which subtly serves “the colonial concept” (Ohnesorge 49). A solution is to have visual

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material which accompanies museum exhibitions of Native American art be designed by tribe members themselves, in order to ensure that cultural values are adequately conveyed and historically imperialist traditions do not slip into well-meaning exhibits.

The simplification, and consequently mistreatment, of Indigenous peoples in encyclopedic museums occurs through a lack of understanding regarding different ways of conceptualization as well as of the homogenization of diverse Native American tribes, often underneath the blanket term 'Indian', which in itself exemplifies the imposition of European misunderstanding upon Native peoples of the Americas. Contemporary institutions such as the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington DC, a national museum which can be for this purpose considered encyclopedic due to its inclusion of many different self-identified nations, have been criticized for inadequately distinguishing differences between tribes. Such a presentation is problematic because non-tribe specific "Native American Art" exhibitions serve to make the cultural encounter easier for Anglo visitors through simplification at the expense of the tribes, consequently leaving no space for the appreciation of the complexities which constitute distinct nations and creating one static picture of Native Americans. This in itself is an argument against large survey exhibitions at encyclopedic museums, which present to visitors an indistinct experience. Because viewers are not immersed in another culture, an activity which takes full commitment, but rather in a less concentrated conglomeration of similar cultures, they are unable to thoroughly engage with the intricacies of another mindset and are likely end up drawing uninformed conclusions in the next gallery.

Language plays a crucial role in exhibits, as it exercises profound control over thought-processes and perceptions of the world. This is a powerful argument for the abolition of wall plaques, display labels, and guiding catalogues, as they are always in languages Anglo languages

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like English, and therefore seeking to define Native American art in a language which is not designed for, or has not been conditioned in the service of, its essential and complex ideas. A simple example can be found in Indigenous Art exhibitions of turquoise, which “explain its history, technology, and use in terms of silver jewelry, which of course is what is most important to Anglos, rather than in terms of turquoise, which is what is most important to Native American people” (Houlihan 209). Because these intended explanations are written mostly by non-Natives in a language which is a vessel of non-native thought, they do not accurately convey Native American meaning, that “for the Pueblo, turquoise represents one of the four primary substances in the world...for the Navajo, turquoise marks one of the four corners of their universe” (Houlihan 209). Even if such ideas are translated into English, as above, they lack the crucial poignancy and meaning of their original language; the English term universe can have entirely different connotations from Native words for similar concepts, which differ tribe to tribe. A poem can never be translated; a translation is a new poem altogether. Thus, when we attempt to summarize what is “important” about works of Native Art in English, we lose something, and most importantly, we write the history of other people, and attempt to encapsulate their art in a language which does not reverberate. In the act of translation writers often see a poem disintegrate, or at least become diminished, through the loss of a certain word which cannot be adequately expressed in another language or does not achieve the necessary cadences. In contemporary exhibitions of artwork by the Hopi Nation, the word Hopi is often defined for visitors as “the peaceful people”. According to a Hopi leader, this translation is oversimplified, “a definition some white men came up with. It is only one of the meanings of Hopi” (Page 21). This elder goes on to explain that the word can also be understood as meaning something akin to ‘righteous’, but that this is similarly problematic as it has negative connotations in English,

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demonstrating the complexities which arise from language and are often not carefully considered by directors and curators of encyclopedic museums. Museum texts focus museum-viewers on specific interpretations of objects, and because these interpretations are in an Anglo tongue, they are profoundly Anglo in nature and potentially less able to lend themselves to other ways of thought. The static is again an issue, because words which are unable to convey meanings of Native American art undermine its poetry through simplification, pinning it like an exotic insect and in the process losing the beauty of its motion. A different tactic would be to renounce attempts at explanation in exhibits of Indigenous art, to “read” an exhibition as one reads a poem or listens to a song written in a language he or she cannot speak; namely, to encourage a reliance on the musicality which exemplifies true purpose. This would be demanding of viewers as it requires a frightening embrace of the abstract, but it leads an experience of art as something visceral and able to be appreciated for its intrinsic qualities, which could lead the way to a level of true understanding.

A final concern with exhibitions of Native Art created primarily by non-tribe members stems from the confusion over what constitutes Native American Art, and the damage which this has done to Native peoples through another, equally poignant, imposition of the static. The dispute over the definition of what makes a work authentically Native American, a “Western notion of political and ethnic identity just as foreign to Indigenous people as was, historically, the aesthetic construct signaled by the term ‘art’ (Berlo, Phillips 19) often functions to “romanticize the past of Native peoples at the expense of their present” (Berlo, Phillips 19). Exhibitions in encyclopedic museums often come from collectors who, historically, “strive to obtain the oldest or the most pristine examples of an artifact type” (Berlo, Phillips 32) and frequently focus on older collections of art. Traditional materials become the focus, considered

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more “authentically” Native American according to a stagnant concept of the term, for their lack of Western influence in format and media. Encyclopedic museums also rarely present much contemporary art as Indigenous. This lends credence to the aforementioned stereotype that vital Native American communities are a thing of the past; worse, it functions to deny and inhibit both conceptually and stylistically the natural inclination towards change and complexity which characterizes humanity and can be seen throughout the history of Indigenous art. To imply that the dynamism in contemporary Native American art demonstrates corruption of Native artistic styles by the West is both a highly ethnocentric and disturbingly pervasive concept which denies not only Native Artists’ humanity and subsequent right to complexity but also compelling evidence to the contrary, such as Oscar Howe’s argument that his artistic experiments “were a logical outgrowth of the Sioux artistic and mythic tradition” (Berlo, Phillips 222). This argument also serves to further the lingering colonial concept by “mask[ing] the power of these images to transcend cultural boundaries and limit[ing] this work by condescendingly appending them to the dominant tradition” (Berlo, Phillips 223). Consequently, Native American art is simplified, rendered static, and essentially disenfranchised through the process of being defined by the dominant culture. In an exhibition space such as the U’Mista cultural center, the problem is eradicated by the simultaneous presence of artistic and linguistic exploration and its active, continuously evolving self-definition; in an encyclopedic museum, it can be exacerbated by its confinement to a gallery.

Although encyclopedic museums are valuable cultural resources, they are imperfect, institutions which often unavoidably present a version of the world as defined by the dominant culture. Because of both their scale and internalized, unconsciously Western conceptions, they come up short of adequately exhibiting the art of Indigenous Americans. In order to transcend

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static exhibitions and to afford art the respect it deserves, Native American art should be exhibited at the discretion of Native peoples. In this way, it can be emancipated from the service of contrived accessibility to non-Native viewers, and instead used to provoke connections which can arise only from the realization of its complexity and mobility.