



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2023 Volume I: Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865

Curator as Detective: Looking for Missing Stories in Museums

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“Museum people are mistaken when they believe museums collect “things.” They collect memories, meanings, emotions, and experiences. Without the “things,” the collections would not exist, but without the memories, meanings, emotions, and experiences, museums would not exist.” - Fred Wilson

Museums are a foundational civic institution. The range and diversity of museums is remarkable. Museums collect, preserve, and present artifacts of cultural and scientific importance, educating the public, aiding researchers, and preserving heritage for future generations. But, like any institution, museums can fail to serve society, and like any institution, if we want them to improve, they can be and should be critiqued.

In this unit, students will be exploring the value of art and the job of a curator by participating in an art auction and then building a museum model for their art. Then, we will explore ethical dilemmas generated by modern repatriation debates by researching how museums acquired select artifacts, including through colonial and imperial violence, and develop and argue their opinions for an ethical resolution for the museum community and the community of origin for the artworks. We will look at the way that curatorial choices help build the narrative of the artwork. By re-curating select artworks through an exhibit of our own design, we will expand the narrative to include more people, because art history reflects the history that affects us all.

(Developed for AP Art History, grades 11-12, and Art 1-2, grades 9-12; recommended for Art 1-4, grades 9-12)

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