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Curator as Detective: Looking for Missing Stories in Museums

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Introduction

"But museums are neither neutral sheltering spaces for objects nor simple architectural products; rather, they are complex totalities that include everything from the building to the selection and ordering of collections and the details of their installation and lighting." - Carol Duncan [1]

When my students angrily tell me "Schools are like prisons!" I agree and let them know that the French philosopher Michel Foucault reached the same conclusion a half a century ago. In their anger I see the beginning of institutional critique, calling out the racism and imperialism visible in institutions that shape their lives. In my art class, we turn that attention to the institution of museums.

The VMFA, the largest Fine Arts museum in the state of Virginia, is minutes from my school, but in its upper-class neighborhood (next door to the Daughters of the Confederacy) it is a world away from the lived reality of my students who are still impacted by the fallout of segregation, redlining, and massive resistance to integration. Like any museum, its collection is full of vibrant and life-affirming artwork, but like any museum, many of the items in the collection have troubling provenances that bring up ethical issues that demand close and critical examination.

Rationale

Museums evolved from their origins in the early modern period as collections of objects assembled by wealthy individuals. Since the nineteenth century the museum has itself as unquestionably authoritative, the purveyor of truths about art and history. Carol Duncan reflects on how museums reflect and reify social values and how curators accomplish this work by saying "To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community's highest values and most authoritative truths." [2]

Critiques of museum have been gaining in energy since the 1960s, an evolution has accelerated in recent decades, especially within the last few years following the 2020 George Floyd protests. Particularly significant

is the way United States respond to Indigenous objects in their collections. They are bound under NAGPRA [3] to investigate claims of repatriation of artifacts to the Indigenous people they may have been taken from and return the artwork if the claim is found valid. Histories of slavery, equally, demand that museums reconsider traditional approaches. Many museums are updating their labels for paintings like colonial-era portraiture, acknowledging that the wealth highlighted in and that enabled these portraits were the result of the sitter's participation in slavery. [4]

While museums can be a force for the preservation of historical objects and for the education of a community, they, like any institution, face serious issues. Why would a museum like the American Museum of Natural History contain Native American artwork from the 19th century, [5] when contemporary work from European artists sits squarely in fine arts museums? What does it mean that, until recently, Indigenous American artwork was described as *primitive* when artwork made at the same time in Europe or by white Americans, were not? [6]

Many of my high school students reach voting age with apathy, sure they could never change anything, and their voices do not matter. But civic engagement on cultural issues has shaped their world. It brought down the Confederate statues that once guarded the way to the local arts museum. In research, exploration, and discussion of ethical issues still present in museums today, I hope to help my students feel engaged with their community and empowered to affect positive change, leaving my classroom ready to be active citizens, ethicists, and art detectives.

Unit Content

The objective of this unit is for students to explore ethical issues related to museums, and through research, discussion, and artmaking understand debates about museum ethics. Based on these discussions, they will explore future changes in museum practice. The following is information necessary to support teachers in navigating these ethical issues with students, and to give context to later suggested classroom activities.

The Past

Museums have long been thought of as essential teaching tools. [7] Within the history of the word lies this relationship, the English *museum* coming from the Latin *museum* meaning "a library or study," the Latin coming from the Greek *mouseion* meaning "place of study, library or museum, school of art or poetry." [8] Early artifact collecting and display was used as displays of wealth by those in power during the Renaissance and were built as displays of power by colonial empires. Carol Duncan points out this display is evident in even the architecture of museums, comparing the design to that of temples or palaces. [9]

As the modern museum developed, so did the nature of its curator. Steven Lubar describes expectations of curators at public museums during the 18th century, that they should be "learned, knowledgeable about collections, and willing to work with the public." [10] These standards are reflected in the backgrounds of curators of new institutions like the Smithsonian in the 1800s, who were typically trained in the field they curated, and then taught themselves how to curate; thus, artists became curators in art museums.[11] In other museums like the Art Institute of Chicago, the trustees (mainly wealthy benefactors) acted as curators and

considered themselves “connoisseurs.” Their definition of the value of art was limited by specific class and gender biases.[12] This elitism lingered as professional training of curators began in the 1920s, [13] but is being pushed back against by curators today with Franklin D Vagone and Deborah E Ryan in their book *Anarchist’s Guide to Historic Home Museums* instructing readers to “Openly acknowledge any philosophic, economic, or social differences” between the nearby community and the mission of their museum. [14]

In the early 20th century, the widespread belief that Native American culture was “doomed to extinction” led to a dash by anthropologists to secure religious, cultural, and biological artifacts often in what now seem profoundly unethical ways. [15] R. Stewart Culin, curator for the Department of Ethnology at the Brooklyn Museum, was one of these collectors. [16] Many artifacts were sold directly to him by Zuni people in economic crisis, desperate for money for food. [17] Even precious religious artifacts were sold - reluctantly, and under the cover of darkness, all for survival. What may seem a simple market transaction was brought about by societal violence. The outrage felt by the Zuni at this economic manipulation pleased Culin, who considered the “outrage proof of its value.” [18]

Works donated to museums, which amount to 90% of the collections of America’s museums, [19] , are not exempt from these concerns. How, we must ask, did the donors acquire their objects?

The Present

In the US, thirty-seven laws control the legality of museum donations and collections[20] , including standards for the “repatriation”, or “the return or restoration to one’s own country”[21] , of artwork based on its “provenance”, or “the origin, source or quarter from which anything comes”[22] , more specifically in the art world a tracking of every time an artwork changed hands from the time it left the artist to the present owner.

Laws and Repatriation

A major example of one of these laws is NAGPRA. NAGPRA, or Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [23] , created a legal pathway for Native Americans to reclaim from museums the human remains of their ancestors and objects of cultural and ceremonial importance that were improperly obtained by museums. [24] The 1990 law, a result of decades of Native American organizing, was met with significant resistance by the museum community at large, who worked to try to stop the legislation before it was passed.[25] Their concerns were many, including that repatriated artworks would simply be resold, that artworks would not be maintained properly in their communities of origin, and that the collections of museums would be cleaned out to the detriment of the museum visitors. [26]

Despite the law outlining the process for repatriation, implementation has been difficult even in museums very sympathetic to cooperation. As part of the law, museums had to inventory potential items that could be repatriated under the law[27] , a process hindered by the fact that even today, less than 10% of all American museums have their entire collections cataloged while 30% have not cataloged any of their collection.[28] We most likely do not know the full extent of artwork in violation of NAGPRA or any other of the 37 laws that govern what a museum may legally have within their collection. Art repatriation is an expensive process. The Navajo Nation has estimated for them to work within NAGPRA to get their artwork repatriated would cost $450,000 a year [29] , so lack of resources can result in important cultural objects languishing in storage. Still, highlighting modern day co-operation, Steven Lubar points out that now, that “Most museums consider the spirit of these laws, rather than simply following them to the letter” as museums ensure that their submissions

criteria for art obtained in the present day creates an extremely high bar for artworks to clear to prove that they were acquired ethically, so that issues created due to past methods collecting are not repeated. [30]

Art acts as powerful symbols of culture and identity, and so, the misappropriation or theft of it during colonial, imperial, or fascist regimes can affect communities in a far deeper way than simply the loss of a physical object. Returning them can be a step to healing these scars. Due to this understanding, beyond legal framework there are other systems set up to oversee the documentation, investigation, and potential return of artworks whose provenance place them as to likely have been appropriated by the Nazi regime in Europe from 1933-1945. Searchable databases are maintained by cooperating museums to aid the process of identifying artwork and returning it to families. [31]

Exploring the role of the museum in these actions of repatriation can help students highlight the use of institutions in society for upholding ethical norms within a culture. Looking at the job and the mission of the curator is vital for understanding the position of a museum in society. As Lubar states when describing the motivation of some of the civil rights groups of the 20th century with donating artifacts from their struggle to museums, "Being in a museum can mean something is no longer part of current culture but part of history." [32] But what history is that museum telling? And is it the same as it means to tell? Whose history is being told?

Institutional Critique

It is a reaction to the history of this institution with noble ideals and a complicated reality, the practice of Institutional Critique has developed. Institutional Critique is defined by the Tate as "the act of critiquing an institution as artistic practice, the institution usually being a museum or an art gallery." [33] Exploring Institutional Critique can help students learn how to give attention to ethical problems they see in society in a way that people will listen to.

One of the leading artists in Institutional Critique is Hans Haacke. Hans Haacke has faced cancellation of exhibits in reaction to his artwork critical of institutions. One project that involved polling visitors on their political opinions related to the Vietnam war resulted in the Guggenheim pulling a 1971 exhibit. A 1974 project to hang the *Bunch of Asparagus* by Édouard Manet alongside information about the path it took from artist to the museum in Cologne, was rejected when it was shown the provenance involved a man who had worked to economically stabilize Nazi Germany but was an important museum donor. [34]

Another leading artist in Institutional Critique is Fred Wilson. In his major work, *Mining the Museum*, a 1992 installation at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. In this exhibit, he contrasted works of art from within the collection to display the unexamined in Maryland history. For example, under a display labeled *Metalwork 1793-1880*, he displayed both sumptuously detailed silver tableware with slave shackles. *Cabinetmaking 1820-1960* showed both ornate colonial-period furniture and a well-used whipping post.[35] Audience and docent reactions were included in the exhibition catalog, some expressed outrage, but many more expressing support and describing revelations they experienced upon viewing the exhibit. [36] Beautiful Trouble, a collection of resources for fighting bias through joy and creativity, includes this work as an example in their guide and says it worked so effectively on viewers because "was suggestive rather than didactic, provocative rather than moralizing." [37]

Looking outside of the artifacts on display and more at the physical space of the museum, Andrea Fraser, artist involved in Institutional Critique, gave guided 'tours' of the museum's security system as part of one of her exhibitions under her alias as a mild-mannered docent. [38] In this way, she highlights the care given to

protect artworks while the same care and protection is often not given to the culture of origin.

The Future

Museums can be problematic spaces, but even artists who engage in Institutional Critique have positive relationships with many aspects of museums. Much like we would encourage students to grow and evolve their ethical beliefs over time in reaction to the latest information, museums are evolving too to the shifting climate.

For example, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was a signatory to the *Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums* back in 2002. This was a statement released and signed by many major museums in favor of encyclopedic museums and not in favor of large-scale repatriation. [39] Now, they have a curator whose sole job encompasses provenance and repatriation, [40] and recently she has reversed course on the 2012 decision to refuse to return bronzes looted from Benin in 1897 to Nigeria, now calling them "looted work" and saying, "We would like to restore the rightful ownership of them in some way". [41] A look at their online 'Ownership Resolutions' tracker catalogues the museum's return of multiple artworks that were improperly acquired thanks to Nazi seizure during World War Two or taken under duress or outright stolen from Native American people. [42] The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts tracks repatriated artwork as well, most recently a Tlingit headdress in 2011. [43] Tristram Hunt, director of the Victoria & Albert Museum reflected that "Colonialism reshaped the cultures of both the colonised and the coloniser, and it is up to museums to address that complex and nuanced story." [44]

Even artists that focus on institutional critique are quick to specify their goals as not adversarial. Fred Wilson describes his work with museums as creating "strong, lasting friendships" and that "we earn each other's trust." When describing why his projects are so accepted by museums, he explains "Though our views may differ, I respect everyone too much to make fun of anyone." [45] The relationship these artists have regarding museums is not wholly negative, having been impacted by and continuing to visit them the same as many others. Fred Wilson was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art constantly as a child, saying "I grew up in museums." [46] Despite his work in highlighting its troublesome history, Hans Haacke said he gets immense "pleasure" from *Bunch of Asparagus*, and has said "I love going to museums, and not only to get a sense of the social and cultural context in which the objects originated." [47]

It is with this understanding of the ugly past, complicated present, and hopeful future of the institution of the museum that we begin our lesson focused on exploring these ethical issues and re-curating artworks considering them.

Context of Artwork of Focus

Five artworks will be highlighted in this unit, three from collections of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond Virginia, two from the collections of the Metropolitan Museum (known as 'The Met') in New York City. What follows is the art historical information of each artwork exploring the specific ethical issues raised to inform subsequent teaching strategies and classroom activities.

The historical analysis and background of the first two artworks will focus on the *provenance* of the artworks, the second pair of two artworks focus on the *curation* of the artworks, the last artwork focuses on *possible future*s in museums.

Each entry outlines what students should focus on in their analysis and understanding to communicate to the teacher through later classroom activities.

Provenance

The first two artworks of focus problematize provenance. *Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Primary Title)* and *House Model* are both Nayarit ceramic artworks in the collections of the VMFA and the Met Museum, respectively. Both artworks were made over two millennia ago by the Nayarit, one of the indigenous peoples of modern-day Mexico. The ancient Nayarit had a long ceramic art tradition of models of daily life. As such, we have significant understanding about the daily life of Nayarit people due to them portraying it in such a detailed manner in their artwork. These artworks were buried in tombs, with the Met saying in the specific example of the celebration shown in *House Model,* that this action "suggest the Nayarit believed that similar celebrations took place in the afterlife." [48] The VMFA corroborates, stating that artwork like *Man Holding a Mace or Fan* "probably served as guardians for the spirits of the deceased." [49] When students are shown Nayarit artwork, they should view it as a detailed portrayal of the daily life of people in that society, that was important enough to be buried with the dead on a large scale.

House Model, Nayarit, 100 BCE- 200 BCE

House Model is a ceramic artwork, roughly the size of a shoebox, that is a model of a house crowded with people present for what seems to be a feast. The guests seem at ease, some draped over one another, some laying down as though stuffed from eating. Many of the guests sit in pairs, in what the Met identifies as perhaps "Matched male and female pairs" which are "common in larger, freestanding West Mexican ceramic sculptures, and may represent ancestors or the primordial couple, the origins of humankind and society." *House Model* has no provenance before being identified in New England in the 1960s, and after changing hands several times it ended up in the Met in 2015. There are two question marks within the Met's provenance entry. [50]

Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Primary Title), Nayarit, 300 BCE – 200 CE

Man Holding a Mace or Fan is a small (similar in size to the *House Model*) terracotta warrior holding a weapon, possibly a mace. The fashion of the figure is rendered with exquisite care, from the depiction of a wrapped fabric helmet to the "elaborately painted poncho decorated with geometric designs" with the individual colors of the patterns still visible. The object has no provenance recorded by the museum before its donation by private citizens to the museum in 1980. [51]

These provenances show no information about how these objects left two millennia old graves and made it to museums within the United States. This is the reality for many, many more objects with museum collections. We lack proof these objects were acquired from their culture of origin appropriately, and in studying these artworks we raise the ethical issues discussed previously in this curriculum. Knowing both the art historical purpose of these objects, that they were exclusively thought of as funerary art, meant to protect and comfort the dead, knowing what we know about how indigenous art was acquired before the second half of the 20th century, it is impossible not to wonder: could the artworks presence in respectable museums be the result of

graverobbing? This question can be posed to students for them to answer, for them to think about while they are in museums, and to think about solutions.

Curation

The second group of two artworks to be highlighted in this unit will focus on culturally responsible museum strategies. Using these artworks, students will explore what museums are doing to present the story of an artwork to visitors through curation, present-day repatriation issues, and conflict with the cultures of origin for certain artworks. *Chief's or Diviner's Figure representing the Belgian Colonial Officer, Maximilien Balot (Primary Title)* [52] and *Community Nkisi (Power Figure) (Primary Title) (with the former title of Community Nkishi)*[53] are both artworks in the VMFA from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Diviner's Figure* was created by the Pende people in 1931. The VMFA states in its provenance it was 'collected' between 1972 and 1973. [54] The Guardian, reporting on the statue, states Herbert Weiss, a college professor purchased it in the Congo in 1972. He donated it to the VMFA in 2015. [55]*Community Nkisi* was created by the Songye people sometime between the 19th and 20th century and was purchased by the VMFA in 1989 thanks to an endowment from private donors. [56]

Community Nkisi (Power Figure)

Community Nkisi are part of a Songye arts tradition of power figures built to "harness beneficial powers of great ancestors." This example is 32 inches tall and around 8 inches wide. Every element from the magical 'bishimba' filling its wooden cavities, to the bead jewelry and raffia skirt, to the metals and horn on its head have some symbolic meaning of status, health, protection, and good fortune. In the case of the *Community Nkisi*, the information given on the VMFA's artifact page gives context for curatorial choices that work with the culture of origin's cosmological beliefs. The gallery the object is exhibited in at the VMFA is designed along the Kongo cosmogram, with this object being placed at 'Midnight' or 'Musoni.' Across from the figure is 'Noon,' represented by a king's robe and creating the ancestral spiritual pathway 'Mukula.' [57] When analyzing this artwork, students should analyze how the arrangement of the exhibit space helps support the cultural narrative, showing that ample respect towards this cultural belief is important in understanding the meaning of the artwork.

Chief's or Diviner's Figure representing the Belgian Colonial Officer, Maximilien Balot

The creators of *Diviner's Figure* looked to trap the spirit of Maximilien Balot within it. Maximilien Balot was a cruel colonial figurehead who was killed during a tax collecting-related confrontation in the early 20th century. One can tell the intensity of hatred felt towards him is reflected in the rigid posture and cold glare of *Diviner's Figure*, something completely lacking in *Community Nkisi*, which has a more relaxed posture and a warm expression, despite both being similarly sized and similarly constructed figures in a similar context of art traditions. This object could have also been created by the Pende to use as a ritual weapon in battle against the Belgian colonial rule. When analyzing the artwork, students should discuss the effect of the rigid, looming posture on the viewer and compare the similar beliefs of art affecting souls, but the differing purpose of its creation as opposed to *Community Nkisi*. Additionally, compare curation: *Diviner's Figure* and other similar Pende figures would not have been publicly displayed, rather they would have only been in a back room of a ritual house only the priests would have had access to. [58] Students should analyze whether this is an example of respectful curation if the museum were to have it on public display.

The artwork is not on view currently, and not due to this historic context of the artwork. In 2020, a group of

Congolese artists working under the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (CATPC) requested that the VMFA loan the artwork to a local Congolese museum, the White Cube. The VMFA refused, saying the artwork was already on loan to a Swiss museum, then later claiming their museum, built in 2017, was not finished. In 2022, CATPC artists downloaded an image of the artwork from the VMFA website and began making and selling NFTs of the image, which a furious spokesperson said, "violates our open access policy and is unacceptable and unprofessional". In response, Matthieu Kasama, a representative of CATPC said the artwork is currently "objectified and classified or imprisoned" and of the role of the VMFA that it was "a sterile museum with so many objects looted in Africa, with no other purpose than to make money or educate their own population." He continued "We have the strong impression that they are not ready to lend it to us; it can be lent to a museum in Switzerland or elsewhere, but not to a museum in the plantation for the resistance against which, among other things, it was designed and sculpted."

This reaction by artists who are part of the culture of origin of the artwork shows that while the VMFA may engage with traditional beliefs when it comes to the layout of their exhibit, this is not all that is needed to be culturally engaged and respectful. Additionally, the assertation made by the artists that the Swiss museum was treated differently than the Congolese museum points to potential biases on behalf of the VMFA, a museum in a colonizer country, towards colonized countries. This imbalance is pointed out by the Guardian, comparing the VMFA as an organization with 300 employees and revenue of over $21 million dollars per year compared to the White Cube, a museum created by former plantation workers and sustained through fund raising. [59] Students should analyze how respect goes beyond simple reflection of historical knowledge but should represent active engagement with communities.

The Future

The last artwork to be featured represents the future of relationships between marginalized communities and museums. *Wampum Belt (Primary Title),* in the collection of the VMFA in Richmond, Virginia is two feet long and four inches wide, and is composed of purple and white wampum shell. The artwork was created by Julian Hunter, [60] a Meherrin wampum artist, [61] and Martin Saniga, [62] a Sappony artist and supervisor of American Indian Interpretation in Colonial Williamsburg. [63] The white wampum again spells out "1936 - VMFA - 2021", with some white wampum forming a star-like pattern. [64] The VMFA was founded in 1936 [65] and the artwork was created and purchased by the VMFA in 2021. [66]

Wampum, a shell bead, has a long history in both Native American art and in interactions between colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples. [67] Inspired by the native usage, the shells themselves were accepted payment among Europeans well into the 18th century. However, the most important use of wampum and wampum belts such as this one has been their function amongst tribes of the Northeast as both a gift and as documentation. They have long represented either the creation or the dissolution of the agreement, alliance, or contract. [68]

The creation of this object brings up several points for students to analyze. The artwork was created by two Native American artists, with the clear intention of entering the VMFA collection. Considering the history of wampum belts as representing the making or breaking of contracts, and considering the design represents the VMFA so clearly, it seems as though they are invoking a contract with the VMFA. Are they breaking, or making a contract? If so, what are the terms of the contract? How is our understanding of this artwork shaped by our understanding of other contracts made and broken between Indigenous and state institutions? These questions should be posed to and by students in their analysis.

It could be they are doing both: they are breaking the contract of the old ways that museums and other institutions have treated Native American art and culture, and creating a new contract, one where they as artists are paid for their work and have consent over and benefit from its sale and transfer. Also, by placing this contemporary wampum in the Native American section, the curation fights against the myth of the 'disappearing Native' discussed earlier in this curriculum. It presents Native American art as a legacy still alive and well and incredibly vibrant.

Teaching Strategies

The following are explanations of and examples of how to use the teacher strategies that best support the classroom activities in the following sections.

Anarchy Tags

Another goal is to explore curation. Students will see what choices are made by curators and how they affect perception. An effective strategy for doing so is adapted from the Anarchy Tags exercise in the book *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House*. In the book, the authors detail an exercise where the directors of the Morris Jumel mansion collaborated with them to have visitors leave *Anarchy Tags* through the museum, paper tags where visitors left written comments or opinions every time their attention was caught on guided tours with closed rooms or unguided tours where the rooms were open. [69] This activity can point out where people's eyes go, what they notice, if everyone is noticing similar things, if anything escapes the group's notice completely. Adapting this activity for student field trips to local museums, students can photograph what grabs their attention, what they notice, spots where they have major thoughts to share. For example, what do they notice about the space - the lighting? The arrangement of paintings? What do they wish they could do? What are they excited to see, what are they bothered by seeing? Then, have students submit the photographs with the labels of their thoughts, and aggregate them as a class.

Visual Thinking Strategies

One of the goals of the unit is for students to analyze the above-mentioned artwork, to build their understanding of ethical choices in curation. Visual Thinking Strategies ask students to simply look at the artwork for a certain period, and then say aloud what they notice. Any answer can be unpacked to point out assumptions made in the answer (for example "I see a mother" "How do you know it is a mother?"). In this unit, Visual Thinking Strategies can be expanded to include an additional time spent looking at the artwork after teaching the art historical and ethical background listed above. Students can see if they notice anything different, or if their interpretation of the artwork has shifted with added information.

Argue For The Opposition

Exploration of ethical dilemmas and cultivating one's own ethical beliefs is core in this unit. A strategy for students is to, instead of writing a reflection in support of their personal belief, they should write in support of the opposition to their belief. This helps them either understand their opinion better by understanding the argument against it and how to counter those claims, or it opens their eyes to other perspectives and helps them to shift their opinion based on new evidence.

Classroom Activities

The following classroom activities are designed for students to explore and master concepts outlined in this unit. This unit should take a little more than two weeks in a 90-minute class to complete.

Lesson 1: The Value of Art - Art Auction

Students will understand the different values of art including monetary, cultural, and personal by participating in an art auction.

Day 1

Students will be given a set budget, either as groups or individually, and auction off artworks that, if they win, they have exclusive rights to feature in their own museum models. In the auction, a variety of artworks should be featured including widely known works of art, artwork from this unit, artwork the students resonate with, and famously expensive works of art. After the auction, discuss their choices with the students. Which artworks caused the fiercest bidding and why? Where were there discrepancies between art historical value and personal value for the students? Where did they set aside personal value for perceived value for their museum model? Students will reflect as a class through guided discussion more broadly on their experience with museums. What museums have they visited? What do they know about the job of a museum, the job of a curator, and museums in their community? Are museums important to have, and if so, why?

Lesson 2: Museum Construction and Curation Explore

Students will show understanding of museums as architectural spaces that display art by building their own 3D Museum model that is architecturally stable and best features the art they or their team won in the auction.

Day 2

Students will be given architectural examples of famous museums and discuss as a class how the different architectural choices affect perception. Students will compare the architecture of museums such as The Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond Virginia to the architecture of older Encyclopedic museums such as the Met Museum to understand how architectural choices read can read as symbolic of power or modernity or other aesthetics. Students will discuss how we make assumptions on what is inside a building and how important it is by comparing the architecture of government and legislative buildings and noticing similarities in architectural vocabulary, compared to humbler historic home museums such as the Edgar Allen Poe Museum in Richmond Virginia. Students will brainstorm how they would replicate select architectural features like columns and multi-story buildings through given building materials. Materials such as glue, paper of varying weight, cardboard, scissors, and other craft supplies like pom poms or paint are recommended. Students will begin their models, focused on the base structure.

Day 3

Students will complete their base structure, adding aesthetic design choices. Students must ensure their model is architecturally sound and displays their artwork in a way that they believe best represents the artwork and the narrative of the artwork to guests. Students should be able to justify choices of layout, color,

and framing of the artwork as curatorial choices through written reflections. Otherwise, students have complete creative freedom in the creation of their artworks.

Day 4

Students will complete peer critiques of their classmates' work using Visual Thinking Strategies and submit them. Students will read others' critiques to understand how their work is perceived.

Lesson 3: Ethics Discussion and Exploration

Students will be able to define ‘provenance’ and explore ethics and ethical issues brought up by provenances of select artworks. Students will communicate personal ethical beliefs and why someone may disagree.

Day 5

Students will be introduced to the vocabulary word ‘provenance.’ Students will research the provenance of the works they won in the auction to establish their understanding of provenance as the history of how an artwork got from the artist to the museum. Students will then use web resources to research the context of and provenance of the artworks *Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Primary Title)* by the Nayarit Culture, and *House Model* by the Nayarit Culture, (information about the artwork and resources for the teacher are above under ‘context of artworks of focus’). Students will submit their research and problematize as a class how artworks that were buried with people could have ended up in museums if not by graverobbing, and why *House Model* was previously considered ‘primitive’ artwork.

Students will define ‘ethics’ through class discussion, establishing behaviors they find ethical. Through teacher guidance of the class discussion, establish gray areas of morality: where do people disagree and why? What is our motivation to act ethically? Students will connect ethics to the act of curation in museums. Students will use web resources to research the provenance of, context of, and curation information given for the artworks *Chief's or Diviner's Figure representing the Belgian Colonial Officer, Maximilien Balot (Primary Title)* by the Pende Culture and *Community Nkisi (Power Figure) (Primary Title) (with the former title of Community Nkishi)* by the Songye Culture (information about the artwork and resources for the teacher are above under ‘context of artworks of focus’). Students will establish and discuss their opinions on the ethical issues raised by these artworks through class discussion and then understand their opinion by writing a reflection on why someone may disagree.

Students will learn about *Wampum Belt (Primary Title)* by Julian Hunter and Martin Saniga, 2021 (information about the artwork and resources for the teacher are above under ‘context of artworks of focus’). Students will compare the context, history, and provenance of the artwork to the artwork given above and discuss what differences or similarities they find between the ethics of possession from the museum between this artwork and the others given.

Lesson 4: Museum Field Trip and Artwork Selection

Students will go on a field trip to a local museum, take notes on the curation and discuss their findings, and select an artwork to re-curate.

Day 6

Students will go on a field trip to the local museum, in our case the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond

Virginia. Students will visit a select portion of the museum, in our case the African / Indigenous American section and take notes on what they notice using Anarchy Tags (method outlined above in Teaching Strategies). Students should focus on curation choices: what is the lighting like? How are the objects arranged? What do they notice about the wording of the plaques? When they move through the exhibit, what understanding do they take away from the artworks? Students will select a work of art from the select exhibitions. Students will photograph the work and the plaque and take notes on their first reaction to and interpretation of the artwork. Students will add any prior knowledge about the artwork or the historical context to their notes. Students will photograph artworks that hang next to their artwork of choice.

Day 7

When they return to the classroom, students will review their Anarchy Tag observations and their classmates' observations. Students will discuss their answers to the reflection questions and talk as a class about what they noticed. Students should review their photographs and notes on their selected artwork and write a reflection on how the artworks nearby help tell the story of the artwork, and if they do. Students will complete and submit all written and photographic reflections. Students will be introduced to the rubric for the project and begin to pull resources that would be helpful to research their artwork.

Lesson 5: Re-Curation of Selected Artwork

Students will demonstrate their understanding of ethics and curation through creating and presenting a re-curation proposal of their artwork of choice, incorporating curatorial choices and 3 other artworks that support the narrative of their artwork of choice.

Day 8

Students will use web and library resources to research the cultural and historic context of their artwork of choice to provide adequate historic context for their re-curation exhibit proposal. Students will answer through their research what the artwork was made of and where the materials came from, how the artwork was created, and how it fit with art traditions of the culture of origin and the time period. Students will write the information on the artwork they would provide in their exhibition, from guided tour information for visitors, to the plaque for the artwork on the wall.

Day 9

Students will select three artworks under the following parameters to include in their presentation : one created using similar or the same using the same or similar materials at the same or similar time by the same or similar culture in order to show in their re-curation how that artwork fit in the artistic context of the time, one that is a modern-day artwork done in the same or similar materials by the same or similar culture to show the artistic continuum of the object to modern day, and an additional artwork through their research that is not from that culture, that they feel like it helps support the historical narrative of the artwork. For example, many of the examples of artwork within the Indigenous American and African exhibits at the VMFA were from countries that were colonized. What artwork was made by colonial forces at the time of colonization? What examples of artworks specifically responding to materials or methods used by the people they were colonizing or artworks responding to colonization itself exist? Students will use their research to write what the plaques for these artworks would say in their exhibition proposal.

Day 10

Students will use digital collage with images and text to create an advertisement for their proposed exhibition. Students will use digital collage to create an image showing their finished curated space, where they would place their artworks (all clustered together? On pedestals? On the wall, and if so, where?) what type of lighting would they have (Low, dim lighting? Natural light coming from windows? Bright spotlights?) and what their color palette would be (colors that reflect the location or material of the artworks? Colors pulled from the artworks? A consistent scheme of one color like white?) Students will compile their written research and images of their artwork in a presentation software like Google Slides or Power point that allows them to present to the class what their exhibition would be like. Students should start with their advertisement, then their selected artwork, information that would be written on the plaque and given on a tour, and then the 3 supporting artworks and information. Students should finish with their digital collage that shows how the show would be arranged incorporating design choices like placement, lighting, and color.

Day 11

Students will present finished projects to the class. Students should be graded on thoroughness of research, thoughtfulness of design, and craftsmanship of final product to meet the outlined rubric.

Resources

Reading List For Teachers

Inside the Lost Museum: Curating Past and Present by Steven Lubar

This book explores the history of curation as a practice through museums in the 19th and 20th centuries, while focused on Brown University's defunct Jenks Museum. The author explores not only the ethical issues with the history of museums, but also how museums function as storytellers, and house objects containing those stories, which supports this curriculum by showing the many ways a museum can be within a community, good and bad.

Plundered Skulls, and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture by Chip Colwell

This book details the history of how many Native American artifacts ended up in

museums thanks to colonial power and the legal fight for repatriation, exploring many different perspectives on the issue as well as the ethical arguments made by many of those involved. The author is a curator tasked with ensuring the Denver Museum remains in compliance with NAGPRA and provides excellent ethical arguments for many sides of the issue.

Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader by Fred Wilson and Doro Globus

This book is a collection of essays on the work of Institutional Critique artist Fred Wilson, providing not only valuable insight on the subject but also an excellent reference guide for teaching many of his works, including *Mining the Museum*.

Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums by Franklin D Vagone and Deborah E Ryan

While this book is geared towards curators for Historic Home Museums, the philosophy of the book holds towards curator standards embodies the philosophy of this unit.

Artworks Discussed In Unit

Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Primary Title) 300 BCE – 200 CE by the Nayarit Culture, in the collection of the VMFA in Richmond, VA

House Model 100 BCE – 200 CE by the Nayarit Culture, in the collection of the Met Museum in New York City, NY

Community Nkisi (Power Figure) (Primary Title) Community Nkishi (Former Title) 19th – 20th Century, by the Songye Culture, in the collection of the VMFA in Richmond, VA

Chief's or Diviner's Figure Representing the Belgian Colonial Officer, Maximilien Balot (Primary Title) 1931 by the Pende Culture, in the collection of the VMFA in Richmond, VA

Wampum Belt (Primary Title) 2021 by Julian Hunter and Martin Saniga, in the collection of the VMFA in Richmond, VA

Appendix On Implementing District Standards

This unit aligns with the following Virginia Standards of Learning for Visual Arts for High School Art 1 – Art 4 [70] in the following ways:

This unit aligns with *Standard 6* (concerning the understanding cultural and historical influences of visual arts) by analyzing select works of art as well as exploring their cultural background, and demonstrating understanding of the narrative of works of art by curating select works of art for an exhibition. In this unit students specifically explore art from the Songye and Pende cultures of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as from the Nayarit culture of modern-day Mexico, in addition to artwork made by contemporary indigenous Meherrin and Sapony artists from the east coast of North America.

This unit aligns with *Standard 7* (concerning understanding visual arts as a form of community engagement) by exploring the role of a museum within a community, demonstrating the purpose and value of access to art for a community as well as the careers behind the institution through students building their own museum model, exploring museums in their community, and creating an exhibition proposal with the understanding of communicating the artwork narrative to visitors.

This unit aligns with *Standard 8* (concerning ethical and legal considerations for visual arts and intellectual property) by having students explore the ethical issues behind modern conceptions of property. Museums may 'own' artworks according to our present-day legal framework, but this unit helps students explore the ethical and history behind ideas of ownership in a way that goes behind simply copyright, by exploring how they came into possession of the artworks and whether they did so in an ethical way.

Notes

[1] Janet Catherine Berlo et al., “The Problematics of Collecting and Display, Part 1,” *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995): 10, https://doi.org/10.2307/3046076.

[2] Berlo, Janet Catherine, Ruth B. Phillips, Carol Duncan, Donald Preziosi, Danielle Rice, and Anne Rorimer. “The Problematics of Collecting and Display, Part 1.” *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995): 11. https://doi.org/10.2307/3046076.

[3] Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls, and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America’s Culture* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). 7

[4] Sarah Cascone, “A Massachusetts Museum Is Taking a New Approach to Wall Text: Revealing Early American Portrait Sitters with Ties to Slavery,” Artnet News (artnet, June 19, 2018), https://news.artnet.com/art-world/worcester-art-museum-slavery-wall-text-1305407.

This source details an example of the plaque for an artwork before 2017 that focused on the fashion of the sitter, and then the updated plaque that gave information about the enslaved people from which the family drew their wealth, naming them and giving what information was available about them.

[5] “Northwest Coast Hall,” AMNH, 2017, https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/northwest-coast.

[6] Recuay, *Vessel with Ritual Scene*, 200-700 CE, Ceramic, Slip, 200 BCE -700 CE, New York City, New York, The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310601

This artwork is currently in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of the Met Museum; however, this wing’s collection comes from a now defunct museum called The Museum of Primitive Art, which held exclusively non-European artwork

[7] Steven D Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 2017). 14

[8] “Museum | Origin and Meaning of Museum by Online Etymology Dictionary,” www.etymonline.com, accessed July 16, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/museum.

[9] Janet Catherine Berlo et al., “The Problematics of Collecting and Display, Part 1,” *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995): 10, https://doi.org/10.2307/3046076.

[10] Steven D Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 2017). 75

[11] Ibid, 76

[12] Ibid, 77

[13] Ibid, 84-85

[14] Franklin D Vagnone and Deborah E Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (Left Coast Press, 2016). 47

[15] Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). 5

[16] Steven D Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 2017). 15

[17] Ibid, 17

[18] Ibid, 18-19

[19] Ibid, 45

[20] Ibid, 37

[21] "Repatriation | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Repatriation by Etymonline," www.etymonline.com (Online Etymology Dictionary), accessed July 15, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/repatriation#etymonline_v_12820.

[22] "Provenance | Search Online Etymology Dictionary," www.etymonline.com (Online Etymology Dictionary), accessed July 15, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=provenance.

[23] Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). 7

[24] Ibid, 108

[25] Ibid, 104

[26] Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). 106

[27] Ibid, 111

[28] Steven D Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 2017). 96

[29] Ibid, 113

[30] Ibid, 39

[31] Ibid, 38

[32] Ibid, 43

[33] "Institutional Critique – Art Term | Tate," Tate, 2017,

https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/institutional-critique.

[34] Kristen Hileman, “Romantic Realist,” *American Art* 24, no. 2 (June 2010): 75, https://doi.org/10.1086/656460.

This source is an interview with institutional critique artist Hans Haacke.

[35] Simon Dumenco, "Lost and Found: Artist Fred Wilson pulls apart Maryland’s hidden history," in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus and Fred Wilson (London: Ridinghouse ; Santa Monica, Calif, 2011), 31 – 32

[36] Jennifer A. González, "Fred Wilson: Material Museology," in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus and Fred Wilson (London: Ridinghouse ; Santa Monica, Calif, 2011), 348

[37] “Toolbox,” Beautiful Trouble, accessed July 16, 2023, https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/mining-the-museum/.

[38] Lisa G. Corrin, "*Mining the Museum*: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves," in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader,* ed. Doro Globus and Fred Wilson (London: Ridinghouse ; Santa Monica, Calif, 2011), 49

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[46] Ibid, 163

[47] Kristen Hileman, “Romantic Realist,” *American Art* 24, no. 2 (June 2010): 74–93,

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[48] Nayarit, *House Model,* 100 BCE - 200 CE, Ceramic Sculpture, 100 BCE – 200 CE, New York City, New York, The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/319227.

[49] Nayarit, *Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Primary Title),* 300 BCE - 200 CE, Terracotta with polychrome pigments, 300AD, Richmond, VA, VMFA, https://vmfa.museum/piction/6027262-8112690/.

[50] Nayarit, *House Model,* 100 BCE - 200 CE, Ceramic Sculpture, 100 BCE – 200 CE, New York City, New York, The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/319227.

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