



2020

## Art History, Art Museums, and Power: A Critical Art History Curriculum

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### Recommended Citation

Elizondo, Kristina. 2020. "Art History, Art Museums, and Power: A Critical Art History Curriculum." *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 5, (1). <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol5/iss1/4>

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## Art History, Art Museums, and Power: A Critical Art History Curriculum

### Cover Page Footnote

This article, included in a special issue of this journal, demonstrates one of a variety of research methodologies appropriate to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Art History. It is accompanied by a brief introduction by a SoTL mentor, who worked with the author in the project's development and publication.

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## **Art History, Art Museums, and Power: A Critical Art History Curriculum**

Method: Scholarly Personal Narrative

Author: Kristina Elizondo, *Austin Community College*

Mentor: Parme Giuntini, *Otis College of Art and Design* and *University of North Texas*

### **SoTL Mentor's Introduction**

Using the emerging SoTL methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), Kristina Elizondo articulates how she used personal classroom research, student feedback, and reflection to incorporate critical theory-based approaches in her art history survey and art appreciation curriculums. SPN comes from Social Sciences and often includes ethnographic practices such as observation and detailed descriptions. The approach enables instructors who are focusing on disciplinary-specific issues in their classes to analyze their personal teaching experiences as a data pool. Then, using a variety of analytic techniques, they can identify significant results that can then be presented as practices recognized and used by other professionals.<sup>1</sup>

Elizondo focuses on two issues that are often overlooked in survey and art appreciation courses: the relationship of artists to the social and economic conditions under which art is made and art museum practices of collection and display. Utilizing prevailing scholarly qualitative standards such as clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective communication, and reflective critique, she charts a clear pedagogical study.<sup>2</sup>

This study represents an excellent model for teaching art historians who are interested in using discipline-specific methodologies and their classrooms as robust laboratories to examine, analyze, and participate in SoTL research.

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Ng, the University of North Carolina and Mary A. Carney, the University of North Georgia, "Scholarly Personal Narrative in the SoTL Tent." *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 5.1 (2017): 1-13.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1148441>

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Glassick et al., *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

## **Art History, Art Museums, and Power: A Critical Art History Curriculum**

Kristina Elizondo, *Austin Community College*

### **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, art historians teaching at the college level have identified several significant, systemic problems in the introductory art history surveys. These include but are not limited to a Eurocentric canon reflected in major textbooks and a tradition of static, lecture-based instruction.<sup>1</sup> Many contemporary instructors remedy these issues, at least to a degree, by consciously employing active and participatory learning strategies and incorporating into their curriculum more works of art created by women, people of color, and non-Western cultures.<sup>2</sup> In this recent tradition of disciplinary self-critique and instructional improvement, I continue to seek supplementary approaches that will positively affect my history survey students.

As an associate professor at a large, urban community college, I teach between four and six art history survey classes each semester, and I have taught as many as eleven in a single academic year. Each semester I conduct action research that results in changes to my curriculum based on my instructional experience and the feedback and assessments of my students. As a result of classroom research and my professional, academic, and personal background, and in a further attempt to engage students and to increase the likelihood of transformational learning, I have increasingly taken a critical theory-based approach to my introductory art history survey and art appreciation courses.<sup>3</sup>

This scholarly personal narrative (SPN) provides a personal background and justification for incorporating critical theory-based lessons into the introductory art history curriculum covering Prehistory through the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> This on-going reflection on my teaching practice questions how an art history survey class can benefit from activities grounded in theoretical texts. Narrative descriptions of four curricular areas and an example museum project are included. It is my hope that this article paints a detailed, personal picture of one type of critical theory-based art history survey curriculum, and that it extols the general benefits of, from my perspective and based on my experiences, incorporating critical theory and critical pedagogical theory into art history courses. As SPN, the article will focus on my personal teaching experiences and reflections, organized in a scholarly structure, and demonstrate the possibilities of this method of scholarship on teaching and learning in art history.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Miller Graham, "The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey," *Art Journal* 3 (1995): 30.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Gasper-Hulvat, "Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017): 2.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, critical theory refers collectively to the original Frankfurt School of social theorists *and* the subsequent related theories that focus on issues of human domination and emancipation, including feminism, critical race theories, and postcolonial theories. The formal Critical Theory (capitalized) typically refers only to the original Frankfurt School.

<sup>4</sup> For purposes of concision, this paper focuses only on Art History Survey I: Prehistory through Renaissance, however, I employ similar critical theory-oriented curriculum in Art History Survey II: Renaissance through Contemporary with a comparable level of success.

## Background

My interest in employing a critical theory-oriented curriculum for my art history classes stems from my professional and personal experiences and my academic background. My bachelor's and master's degrees are in Art History, but my Ph.D. is in Art Education. I feel that my dual-discipline art background contributes to my perspective on the teaching of introductory art history surveys at the college level, as does my professional experience as a museum educator.

Prior to teaching art in community colleges, I worked with college students in one of the largest university art museums in the United States. When teaching in the galleries, I asked students questions to enhance their knowledge and develop their skills not only towards specific works of art, but also about the art museum itself. While the students found object-based discussions interesting, especially when relative to their own disciplinary studies, our conversations about the museum itself were almost always the most compelling. Stories about object acquisition, histories about collection areas, display practices, or recalling object provenance produced the most complicated and intense discussions.

When appropriate, I introduced students to Fred Wilson's seminal museum intervention, *Mining the Museum*, and facilitated discussions and explorations within the museum based on Wilson's intervention.<sup>5</sup> Although I never conducted a formal research study to document the outcomes, I noted that learning outcomes were exceptional when compared to students who only experienced object-based museum activities without encountering critical theory/critical race theory/post-colonial theory-based ideas. In addition to observing overall higher student participation rates, significantly higher proportions of students, when exposed to critical approaches to art museum exploration, expressed continued interest in the subject after their museum visit.<sup>6</sup> When I transitioned from teaching in art museums to teaching in college classrooms, I wanted to bring a similar critical theory-oriented perspective to the traditional art history survey curriculum.

## Perspectives on Critical Theory in the Classroom

In an attempt to replicate my previous success teaching critically in the art museum, I continue to employ critical theory as a theoretical foundation for freshman- and sophomore-level art appreciation and art history courses. I do not claim to be a holistic practitioner of a pure critical pedagogy in the style of Paulo Freire.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I incorporate concepts inspired by critical theories, including critical race theory and postcolonial theory, and critical pedagogical theories in order to engage students with compelling, relevant, and opposing perspectives where I feel they fit best into the schedule and curriculum.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Wilson and Lisa G. Corrin, *Mining the Museum: An Installation* (New York: New Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> This was noted in the number of students who spoke and engaged in discussions and questions during the class visits and also in the number of follow-up emails I received from students after their critical theory-oriented visit, when compared to the number of follow-up emails I received from students who experienced a "standard" object-based visit, as recorded in my notes.

<sup>7</sup> Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

Historically, critical pedagogies attempt to navigate avenues towards social justice for students who belong to historically disenfranchised populations by transforming traditional systems of education and increasingly democratizing public schools.<sup>8</sup> I believe that critical pedagogies in art history curriculum are appropriate at all institutions of higher education, but they may be particularly valuable at a community college, where student bodies typically come from underserved and less privileged communities.

In a coincidence of solidarity with the discipline of art history, critical theory argues that human events or products cannot be comprehended without understanding the historical context in which they occur. The disavowal of a singular, or universal history that fits all human experiences is largely based on the notion that such histories have traditionally been associated with Eurocentric domination and are therefore not representative of anyone who may fit outside of that dominant, privileged European classification: women, the poor, people of color, and members of LGBTQ communities.<sup>9</sup>

Correlated areas of concern to issues of Eurocentric bias that are not explicitly recognized in introductory art history survey courses are issues of hegemony within historical and contemporary art historical practices. Without significantly changing the traditional, chronologically-based art history curriculum, I incorporate contextually appropriate lessons that seek to uncover the hidden power structures inherent in art historical practices and institutions. I most often use art museums as the tangible vehicle through which I introduce many of the identified issues, although museums are not part of each curricular area. Art museums are ideal spaces for students to explore issues of power, knowledge, privilege, cultural dominance, and inequality.<sup>10</sup>

Together with the traditional object-based art history curriculum and an exploratory art museum visit, I have observed that the critical theory-based lessons have greatly enhanced the student learning outcomes in my introductory art history survey courses.<sup>11</sup> Based on my personal instructional observations when comparing courses that include the critical theory-based lessons versus those that do not, students experiencing the critical theory lessons have higher rates of participation, the quality of discussions are significantly improved, and the assessments demonstrate considerably higher levels of critical thinking. The lessons I have developed focus

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<sup>8</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Critical Theory and Educational Practice," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, edited by Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Y. Vasquez-Arroyo, "Universal History Disavowed: On Critical Theory and Postcolonialism," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 4 (2008): 453.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Marstine, ed., *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5.; Viv Golding, "The Museum Clearing: A Metaphor for New Museum Practice," in *Social and Critical Practices in Art Education*, edited by Dennis Atkinson and Manoj Kumar Dash (London: Trentham Books, 2005), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Action research methodologies help me develop and refine my curriculum and its implementation. I first implemented the curriculum into my general Art Appreciation classes, which I found was less effective in terms of student learning outcomes. I determined this based on a few sources of data: student participation levels, quality of critical thinking demonstrated in their assessments and discussions, and my own daily observation and subsequent reflection. As a result, I determined that implementing the lessons within the art history survey was more successful. In particular, the chronological context provided a helpful organizational foundation for critique.

on the education and training of artists; textbook bias; specific, controversial examples of object acquisition, ownership, and repatriation; and art museum practices of collection and display.

## Education and Training of Artists

This lesson developed in response to an “a-ha” moment I experienced, inspired by a student comment in Art History Survey I. While talking about the *Stepped Pyramid of Djoser*, a student lamented that it was too bad that we knew the name of Imhotep, but not the names of other Egyptian artists and architects. It occurred to me that I spent a tremendous amount of time talking about the wealthy kings and priests that commissioned the works of art and employed the artists/craftspeople, but I did not mention very much about the artists/craftspeople themselves. I decided to create an activity that would encourage students to consider the lives, training, and social status of artists in different places at different times.

While much is not known about particular ancient artists, my instructional intent is to encourage students to acknowledge and reflect upon the role of the artist. My intended learning outcomes for this activity are for students to analyze and review portions of the first three chapters of the survey, to verbally synthesize their knowledge of the cultures, and recall and evaluate specific works of art from previous chapters.

*“The year is 447 BCE. You live in Athens, and you are in a workshop, using a hammer and chisel to create a sculpture of an athlete out of marble. What is your occupational title? How did you learn how to sculpt/paint? Who is paying you, and how much do you get paid for your work? What is your status in society? Who/what are you making the artwork for, and who determined the subject matter of the object you are working on?”*

These are some of the questions that I ask my students during the class period in which we discuss the education and training of artists. I divide the students into groups of three to four students and print only the five questions on a worksheet that I hand to each group. On a second worksheet, I have printed three different settings in addition to the Athens example above (for a total of four settings):

1. The year is 1800 BCE. You live in Akkad, and you are in a workshop, casting a bronze sculpture of a king;
2. The year is 2500 BCE. You live in Egypt, and you are in a workshop, using a hammer and chisel to create a sculpture of a Pharaoh out of diorite;
3. The year is 2019. You live in the United States, and you are in a workshop, using a paintbrush and oil paint to create a painting on canvas of a businesswoman.

I post the second worksheets with the four different artistic scenarios around the classrooms, and the student groups rotate to each station to discuss the questions. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage critical discussion and consideration of the lives of artists throughout time, specifically those chapters (Mesopotamia and Egypt) we have already covered in class. The activity evolved over time to include Mesopotamia and Egypt; at first, I only considered Greek

art production but I overheard students making their own comparisons to Egyptian art production and realized I was missing out on some great comparative analysis. After students have completed the activity, students are introduced to the concept of artist training in ancient Greece through a PowerPoint presentation.

The objective of this lesson is for students to understand that the creation of art is subject to a historical and social context, and that the art studied in art history surveys has often been commissioned and heavily influenced by people and institutions of wealth and power.<sup>12</sup> The lesson focuses primarily on the power structures that control the production of art in ancient Greece and is introduced prior to teaching about the form, content, and context of ancient Greek art. By emphasizing the social and economic conditions under which the art objects are produced, the theoretical perspective that is emphasized is traditional Marxism.<sup>13</sup>

From the onset of the formal production of art in Western society, an immediate dichotomy is seen between a dominant group (patrons) and an oppressed group (artisans). Foregoing here the instructional level of detail that is presented in class, students are additionally reminded of the enduring uniformity of Egyptian art as a reflection of the political and religious state ideology (not artistic choice) and of church-commissioned art that served to endorse Catholic doctrine (not individual expression) among a largely-illiterate population in the Medieval period. During each of these eras, history presents the production of art as something that is heavily affected by the influence of power, whether from the state, the Church, or wealthy individual patrons.

After the presented lesson, I ask students to revisit the answers they gave on their worksheet for Mesopotamia and Egypt, based on what they have learned in class about artists in Greece. Based on all of the provided examples, students begin to consider that art production has historically been used as a tool by powerful interests—whether to propagandize a religious doctrine, legitimize a government, demonstrate their own wealth and taste, or to indoctrinate the uneducated (among other things). It is because art production has typically been subject to powerful entities throughout history that this lesson is of interest from a critical theory perspective. For the students, the lesson demonstrates that the role of artists and artistic production has evolved throughout history, but one constant is that artistic production and consumption is rarely completely free of powerful societal interests.

The lesson on the education and training of artists is assessed when the students turn in their papers answering the five given questions. In this assessment, I look for examples of critical thinking such as synthesizing information across cultures, comparing and contrasting artistic production across time, and analyzing the relationship between those who make art and those who buy art. I also assess for students recalling specific works of art and concepts previously covered in class, and employing appropriate artistic vocabulary for materials, methods, form, and content.

### **Textbook Bias**

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur D. Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990): 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Wood. "Marxism and Ancient Greece," *History Workshop* no. 11 (1981): 7-9.

This brief activity was developed as a way to address my own feelings of guilt when I taught the extremely short textbook chapters on the art of Africa, China, India, Oceania, and the Ancient Americas. While I have attempted to supplement the brief textbook chapters with objects from local encyclopedic museum collections and my own research, I felt a responsibility to point out to students that their textbook seems to focus much more on Western civilizations, and much less on non-Western.<sup>14</sup> When teaching a textbook-based curriculum that seems to value Western art more than non-Western, I felt complicit in perpetuating prejudiced notions about the relative values of global cultures and the art they produce.

This lesson in particular is intended to promote questioning and discussion rather than absolute answers. In the course of the discussion, I ask students whether or not one is capable of a neutral worldview, and/or whether or not having a worldview is negative. I also ask them to consider the effects, if any, an authoritative source continually disseminating a worldview might have. Based on my observations of class discussions, some students think it is acceptable for a textbook produced and sold in the United States to have a Western worldview. Some students feel that while it is understandable for their textbook to have a Western perspective, they wish the book was more upfront in disclosing bias and worldviews. And other students wonder why the textbook cannot simply balance the chapters better between Western and non-Western cultures, and why Western textbook authors do not acknowledge the contributions of non-Western civilizations to Western civilizations.

*Of the one hundred art historians who have reviewed your textbook, how many are affiliated with universities outside the United States? Is there a dominant voice that has contributed to your textbook, and if so, where does this voice come from geographically? Does your textbook contain more information about Western art or non-Western art? Should a “Global History” textbook include global voices? Why or why not?*

This simplest activity in the critical curriculum is the examination of the assigned textbook. As part of a twenty-minute class activity, I ask students to get into small groups, turn to the table of contents in their textbooks, and to count the number of pages devoted to Western art history and to non-Western art history (these terms are explained as part of the activity). I also ask my students to read the acknowledgements section of the book, which lists roughly one hundred academic reviewers.

Students find significantly more pages and images dedicated to Western cultures and art—approximately sixty percent of the pages in the book are dedicated to Western civilizations, and forty percent are dedicated to non-Western civilizations—and they find that all of the academic reviewers are affiliated with institutions in the United States. Without overtly passing a value judgment over this circumstance, I give my students the aforementioned questions to discuss in their groups.

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<sup>14</sup> The textbook used in my courses is one of the popularly used art history survey textbooks produced by a major academic publisher.

As with the previous activity, this lesson is more about beginning a discussion and process of inquiry rather than making a precise determination. While I supplement the textbook with additional works of non-Western art (all from local art museums) to create a greater sense of equality among cultures, it is important that students recognize that their textbooks are lacking equal representation in certain areas. If the textbook is the guiding force in the class, learning about art is not a culturally neutral act.

The textbook imbalance represents concerns reflected in critical race theories and postcolonial theories because the textbook exemplifies an entrenched, dominant system, grounded in colonial histories, that reinforces racially-related ideas about cultural value and artistic prestige. Because critical theory identifies inequalities created by powerful institutions, students' discovery of their textbook as a representative article from powerful art world institutions is significant. The textbook bias exercise is brief, and assessment is minimal (often a participation grade), but the key to this lesson is encouraging discussion around ideas of bias in the development of a discipline.

### **Object Acquisition, Ownership, and Repatriation**

This lesson was developed after a single class session, early in my teaching career, in which my students unexpectedly debated for most of the class period over the ownership status of the Parthenon Marbles. Based on the consistently great class discussions over just the Parthenon Marbles, I expanded the lesson to include two additional objects currently owned by the British Museum, the Rosetta Stone and a collection of Benin Bronzes.

I noticed from my personal classroom observations that this lesson consistently drew the most heated and passionate participation from my students. Perhaps my favorite student comment was from a student, who after hearing about the Benin Bronzes, raised her hand to say that this really bothered her. She said that she would like to know what she could do to help get the objects back to Nigeria. Because of her feedback, I expanded the lesson to include a letter-writing activity, in which the students can express their own evidence-based opinions. Recently, because of current events, I have again expanded the lesson to include examples of war-based cultural destruction in Iraq and Syria.

*Do you regard the Benin Bronzes as stolen objects? Are dominant cultures justified in acquiring art objects from weaker cultures under the guise of protection or for punitive measures? Do you think the British Museum should repatriate the Rosetta Stone, Parthenon Marbles, or the Benin Bronzes? When you visit an art museum, is it important to know the provenance of the objects you are looking at?*

This important eighty-minute lesson taking a critical theory approach strongly influenced by postcolonial theories is one of acquisition, ownership, and repatriation, which is related to the historical and current practices of art museums. This lesson focuses on two primary subjects: three instances of ethically questionable acquisition of art objects by the British Museum, using the Parthenon Marbles, the Rosetta Stone, and the Benin Bronzes as examples; and the destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria. Lesson learning outcomes include increasing

awareness of object provenance and analyzing the relationships between the antiquities market, collectors, and art museums.

By the time this lesson is implemented, the class has already discussed the Rosetta Stone and Parthenon Marbles in the context of their textbook chapters. The history of the British possession of the Benin Bronzes is introduced, and an in-depth discussion is facilitated. Students are then asked to write a letter to the Board of Directors of the British Museum, in which they are free to express their personal opinions by either expressing support for their continued possession of the statues or expressing their desire for the British Museum to repatriate the objects. Students must provide three, evidence-based justifications for whichever position they take, and propose compromise solutions if they choose.

An additional fun way that I interact with my students on this topic is to poll the percentages of students who consider each of the three contested art objects to be “stolen” and which have the strongest case for repatriation. Almost always, classes unanimously consider the Benin Bronzes to be the objects most unethically obtained; the Rosetta Stone normally has about 85-90% of the class in favor of repatriation; and the Parthenon Marbles are the most contentious, with approximately 65-70% of the classes thinking they are deserving of repatriation.

The lesson, and its letter writing activity, is an example of critical theory curriculum because it includes specific instances of historical and cultural power structures impacting art history. In these particular cases, one culture is exercising a dominant geopolitical position over another. Because the positions of the main players (the British Museum, the New Acropolis Museum, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, and the Nigerian Government) often directly represent or work in conjunction with national governments, it is a particularly rich representation of state-oriented critical theory in practice. The culmination of the lesson in a letter writing activity (the letters are returned to students) also fits notions of self-empowerment and social action, which is fundamental to critical theory in pedagogy.<sup>15</sup>

The remainder of the lesson is devoted to the compelling and complex trail from contemporary war zones in Iraq and Syria to American collectors and art museums. Students are surprised to learn that since 2011 the Islamic State (ISIS) directed looting efforts in order to finance its campaign and that in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, Iraqi insurgents were regularly found with objects that had been looted from the Iraq Museum and other archaeological sites, presumably also to be sold on the black market.<sup>16</sup> Proceeds from the sale of these objects continue to support insurgents and terror groups, with many examples of links between unverified

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<sup>15</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 39; Robert Peterson, “Teaching How to Read the World and Change It: Critical Theory in the Intermediate Grades,” in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, edited by Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003): 354; Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres, eds., “Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction,” in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Bogdanos, “Thieves of Baghdad,” in *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, edited by Peter G. Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2008), 124. Matthew Twombly, “Looting and Conflict: The Isis Antiquities Pipeline,” in *National Geographic*, (June 2016). <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/06/looting-isis-antiquities-pipeline/>.

objects from this geographic area (and other areas rich with antiquities) and American collectors and institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Students are genuinely surprised that instances of deliberate cultural and artistic theft, which students viewed as something that happened “back in history” with objects like the Benin Bronzes, continue to this day. The deep, brazen, and almost conspiratorial relationship that can exist between art, wealth, and power is further established, and students are able to add another layer of critical theory-oriented questioning of existing conditions within artistic establishments in the United States. We conclude the lesson with examples of art museums, including local museums, repatriating works of art to their legal owners.<sup>18</sup>

### **Art Museum Practices of Collection and Display**

When I worked as a museum educator, I often reflected on how I would teach in the art museum environment if I had a more sustained, “captive” audience, rather than the typical, single-visit, “drop-in” visitor that comprised the audiences I usually worked with. Upon becoming a classroom instructor, I spent several years developing lessons to help students understand art museums prior to their assigned, in-person museum visits.

Based on a few semesters of polling my students and assessing student work, a great majority, usually around 90%, had never previously visited an art museum. It seemed apparent when reading their papers, which asked students to consider and describe the museum environment, that students lacked the ability to independently describe or critique the art museum on their first visit. I decided to spend class time preparing students for their museum visit because I hypothesized that, if students were more knowledgeable about art museums, the museum-based learning outcomes would be more successful.

*How does an institution amass a collection of such wealth? How might the physical qualities of the space in which an object is displayed affect the perception of the object? Is it possible for a museum to reinforce stereotypes about an entire culture through an exhibition of objects? If you could rearrange the objects in the museum, what values would you use to arrange them?*

In the case of this particular lesson, an encyclopedic art museum is an ideal laboratory for the exploration of critical theory-oriented ideas seen in critical race theories and postcolonial theories. Through their large, global collections, encyclopedic art museums in the United States

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<sup>17</sup> In 2000, Cornell University acquired as a gift more than 1600 cuneiform tablets from Ur, despite ten percent of the objects having uncertain provenance and widespread looting being known to have occurred in Ur following the Gulf War in the early 1990s (see Bogdanos, 122). More recently, in 2017 the Green Collection, named for Hobby Lobby President Steve Green, was forced to return 5,500 pieces of looted cuneiform tablets from Iraq that were intended to be displayed at the Bible Museum in Washington, D. C. The tablets were discovered as they were being intentionally smuggled into the United States under false customs descriptions, and they were purchased despite the Green Collection being warned about the widespread looting of artifacts from Iraq and Syria after recent conflicts (see Nina Burleigh, “Christian Retailer Hobby Lobby Stole Middle East History to Make a Bible Museum in Washington,” in *Newsweek* (July 6, 2017), <https://newsweek.com/hobby-lobby-iraq-antiquities-evangelicals-632434>).

<sup>18</sup> In the Survey II curriculum, this lesson primarily focuses on issues of repatriation from objects stolen in WWII.

can perpetuate dominance through constructs of culture, race, history, power, and knowledge, and therefore can serve as an oppressive force on those who are not members of dominant groups.<sup>19</sup>

There are several curricular objectives to the three, sixty-minute classes dedicated to helping students understand art museums. The first class introduces students to the art museum as a complex institution with specific functions, reviews basic vocabulary associated with art museums, and explains the traditional function of art museums to collect, preserve, display, and interpret. The curriculum also touches on the financial workings of art museums, including endowments, capital campaigns, membership programs, and staff positions. A key learning objective of this lesson is for students to understand the fundamental existence and complexities of a large, encyclopedic art museum in the United States.

The second lesson concentrates on art museum histories and collection and display practices. Among the greatest examples of encyclopedic art museums are the British Museum and the Musée du Louvre, whose historical origins as Enlightenment-era institutions embody principles that critical theorists oppose. Both institutions are introduced, touching on the Musée du Louvre's historical associations with the French monarchs and Napoleon's conquests, as well as the British Museum's establishment by an act of Parliament and its acquisition of the Rosetta Stone and Parthenon Marbles in the early 1800s.<sup>20</sup>

Typically, students are interested in the associations between art museums, colonial expansion, and the aristocracy. From this particular point of view, these art museums are funded by the state, grounded in Enlightenment-era positivism, capable of producing culture and participating in cultural domination,<sup>21</sup> and representing Eurocentric bias in a normative fashion.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to art museum histories, students also analyze and evaluate images of various museum galleries for discussion. Groups of students view images of salon-style installations, ethnographic museums, stark white galleries, galleries with dark lighting and colors, interactive displays, etc., and are encouraged to discuss the spaces and assign adjectives to them and the objects in them. The learning objectives for the second lesson include increasing student understanding of art museum histories and becoming familiar with methods of object acquisition and display.

The third and final in-class art museum lesson involves a critical discussion of Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* and the assigning of a self-guided art museum project. Students are assigned reading excerpts describing Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* intervention at the Maryland

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Exhibitionary Complexes," in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, edited by Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szawaja, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Function of Museums*, 2nd ed. (Plymouth, UK: AltaMira Press, 2008), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Art museums are ideal purveyors of the "culture industry" identified by Theodor Adorno in Giroux, "Critical Theory," 40.

<sup>22</sup> Marstine, *New Museum Theory*, 14.

Historical Society, and are given the opportunity to consider and respond in small groups. At this point, students have a basic understanding of art museum functions, histories, and practices of object display. This lesson attempts to take their basic knowledge and pose a critical theory-oriented problem: *Do art museums contain silent messages about value, history, and power?*

Students are required to visit a local, encyclopedic art museum to conduct analyses of three art objects and of the art museum itself. They are provided with two worksheets (see Appendix): one that directs them to certain galleries to conduct in-person assessments of the physical qualities of the spaces; and another featuring prompts to help students synthesize their experiences in the spaces of the art museum.<sup>23</sup>

Based on several years of implementing the curricula in my classroom, I have observed that my students overwhelmingly respond positively to the opportunity to evaluate the art museum based on their own observations. Based on my assessment of their work, while they report overall appreciation in analyzing familiar art objects firsthand, they often report a greater sense of satisfaction from their ability to validate—or not—critical questions raised during class. It is my belief that speaking repeatedly of museums as complicated institutions and as arenas for discourse builds tension and interest throughout the semester, so when students finally visit the museum, their interest is piqued and they are empowered to conduct independent investigations. Based on their own statements, their in-person museum experiences are profound.

From an instructional point of view, this curriculum aligns with Carole Stapp's 1984 article *Defining Museum Literacy* in which she introduces the term "museum literacy." Stapp puts forward that:

Basic museum literacy means competence in reading objects (visual literacy), but full museum literacy signifies competence in drawing upon the museum's holdings and services purposefully and independently. Museum literacy therefore implies genuine and full visitor access to the museum by virtue of mastery of the language of museum objects and familiarity with the museum as an institution. In a word, the museum literate visitor is empowered.<sup>24</sup>

Although Stapp does not specifically cite critical theorists (few inquiries into museum education practices do), her vision for full visitor participation in the museum—via critically learning about the museum as a constructed institution—is aligned with Max Horkheimer's Critical Theory

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<sup>23</sup> The prompts are taken from Wilson and Corrin, "Mining the Museum;" Fred Wilson, "The Silent Message of the Museum," keynote paper presented at the *Museums Australia* Conference, Australia (November 1, 1996); and Ivan Karp, "Culture and Representation," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D.

Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Carol B. Stapp, "Defining Museum Literacy," *Roundtable Reports* 9, no. 1 (1984): 3-4.

criteria for explanatory, practical, and normative experiences for those who oppose existing conditions in art museums.<sup>25</sup>

By introducing various issues of power, history, knowledge, inequality, and representation within the art museum, students are emboldened to explore the museum not as a place of unquestionable authority, but as a laboratory of ideas that are subject to human bias. There is an underlying message of empowerment: the curriculum and activities posed problems, and allowed students to be co-investigators in a real-life museum exploration in which solutions and actions are proposed.

The art museum projects demonstrate strong levels of critical thinking as well, with student projects indicating careful consideration of the art museum spaces. Some students see bias in the art museum and others do not, but a majority of the students provide careful, detailed observations that support their conclusions. Many students are able to point out specific objects with problematic installations, and create (via narrative description) alternative, more equitable methods of display, which demonstrates the considerable critical thinking skills of observation, analysis, synthesis, and creation.

In my experience employing this curriculum over several years, I observed an unintended but measurable result of implementing the critical curriculum was the more enthusiastic reaction students had to visiting the museum. Because I received high levels of positive student feedback, I continued to expand, improve, and refine the lessons, and I continued to receive higher levels of positive student feedback. Perhaps it is counterintuitive, but my personal observations found the more students viewed art museums through a critical lens, the better their experiences were at the museum. Almost 100% of students who were assigned the critical project reported that they would return to the museum, whereas only approximately 70% of students that completed a simpler visual analysis project reported a desire to return to the museum.

I wanted my students to learn about many aspects of art museums, including their history and function, in order to hopefully build a deeper, more complex and meaningful relationship between students and the museum. So I designed lessons that attempt to “lift the curtain” and try to lower the intimidation factor for and lend a sense of empowerment to a first-time museum visitor. Based on some student comments, it seems that many students, due to their developing knowledge in the classroom, experience a sense of ownership/membership at the museum, which is particularly gratifying as an instructor who has worried in the past about my students being perceived as outsiders inside the museum environment.

## Reflections

A goal of any critical theory pedagogy is to work towards student empowerment.<sup>26</sup> I believe this critical theory-oriented curriculum does that through enriching multiple opportunities for critical thinking: it involves students in concerns surrounding the Eurocentric canon and issues of

<sup>25</sup> J. C. Berendzen, "Max Horkheimer," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/horkheimer/>.

<sup>26</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Giroux, "Critical Theory," 50-54.

hegemony in the discipline and institutions of art history, provides them with deeper and varying opportunities for personal connections to the discipline, and introduces them to a tangible environment in which to conduct independent, critical-theory oriented investigations.

I continue to adapt and create curricula based on experiences and results each semester. I plan each curriculum with specific instructional goals and student learning outcomes; I implement the lessons and related assessments; I observe the process as the instructor and assess student work for comprehension; and then I reflect on the entire experience.<sup>27</sup> The process also reflects principles of action research by (hopefully) improving my knowledge and skills in addition to improving student learning.<sup>28</sup>

The days that I implement the critical theory-based curriculum are my most active teaching days. My notes from these days often record feelings of exhaustion after class due to the intensity of the discussions, which can last the entire sixty to eighty minute class period. However, my notes also record comments from students that indicate the impact of the lessons. Students have interrupted the lessons to ask what they can do to help (with the Benin Bronzes), others have posed compelling, devil's advocate-type questions (with the Parthenon Marbles), and others respond with biting levity (humorously proposing international vigilante/superhero-style squads to "steal back" the art and return it to the rightful owners).

Some art history instructors might be concerned at the idea of dedicating five class periods to non-object-oriented instruction.<sup>29</sup> I initially felt those concerns, but the curricula proved so successful, both in terms of student interest levels and in the increase in the quality of their critical thinking, that the lessons are now fully integrated into my semester schedules.

I would additionally argue that there is a responsibility to comprehensively introduce students to varying perspectives and examples of inequality in our discipline, as well as to thoroughly prepare students for an art museum visit. Not disclosing the complexities within our discipline and institutions is missing an opportunity for a holistic educational experience—from classroom learning to independent site exploration. Avoiding potential conflict by ignoring discussions of race and power within the discipline of art history and/or within art museums is employing a hidden curriculum that actually normalizes dominant culture in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In an attempt to bolster the relevance of my art history survey curriculum and more actively engage my students, I partook in a process of planning, implementation, observation/notation, reflection, and revision over the course of many years. Ultimately, as a result of this personal,

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<sup>27</sup> Joni B. Acuff, "How Will You Do This?" Infusing Multiculturalism Throughout Art Teacher Education Programs," *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 30 (2012): 85.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew P. Johnson, *A Short Guide to Action Research*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc., 2012): 25-30.

<sup>29</sup> Julia A. Sienkewicz, "Against the "Coverage" Mentality: Rethinking Learning Outcomes and the Core Curriculum," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1, (1). <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol1/iss1/5>

<sup>30</sup> Gretchen Bourland Rudham, "Preserving Race and Class: A Critical Ethnography of Urban Art Museum Docents, Backstage and Frontstage Performances," (Phd dissertation, Morgan State University, 2012), 12.

highly reflective process based very much in my own experiences and worldview, I developed a series of critical theory-oriented lessons that have been instructionally successful. This Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) describes the processes and personal reflections that guided my development of the included curriculum.

A critical theory approach to art history curriculum focuses on exposing and examining power structures and positions of domination and oppression within the culture of art. It allows college students to fulfill their age-appropriate interest in deeply examining the world around them by exploring the culture of art as a historically constructed power structure, bursting with complex relationships of power and subjugation. Students can reflect on their own position relative to these power structures, and achieve deeper knowledge of their own self-identity. Introductory art history survey, when influenced by critical theory, encourages students to question aspects of the culture of art that may not be presented in the textbook.

Critical theory-based curricula can take many forms based on the subject matter and personal background and interests of the students and instructor. I will continue seeking course-enhancing pedagogical connections between critical theory and introductory art history survey, as incorporating their philosophical tenets into my art history survey classes has been a valuable educational experience for my students and myself.

## Appendix

### Investigating the Museum

1. Find the **Greek and Roman** galleries in the museum. Look around carefully and answer the following questions:

Is this a prime or valuable location?	
What floor is it located on?	
How much space, relative to the rest of the museum, is dedicated to this gallery?	
Are the galleries spacious and roomy?	
Are the objects cluttered together or spaced apart?	
What color are the walls?	
Is the lighting sufficiently bright?	
Are the object labels in good condition?	
Can you find any artworks made by women?	
Are there artist names on the labels?	
Is this a Western or non-Western culture?	
Are there ancient or contemporary works presented, or both?	
What galleries are on either side of this gallery?	

2. Find the **African** galleries. Look around carefully and answer the following questions:

Is this a prime or valuable location?	
What floor is it located on?	
How much space, relative to the rest of the museum, is dedicated to this gallery?	
Are the galleries spacious and roomy?	
Are the objects cluttered together or spaced apart?	
What color are the walls?	
Is the lighting sufficiently bright?	
Are the object labels in good condition?	
Can you find any artworks made by women?	
Are there artist names on the labels?	
Is this a Western or non-Western culture?	
Are there ancient or contemporary works presented, or both?	
What galleries are on either side of this gallery?	

3. Find the **Ancient American** galleries. Look around carefully and answer the following questions:

Is this a prime or valuable location?	
What floor is it located on?	
How much space, relative to the rest of the museum, is dedicated to this gallery?	
Are the galleries spacious and roomy?	
Are the objects cluttered together or spaced apart?	
What color are the walls?	
Is the lighting sufficiently bright?	
Are the object labels in good condition?	
Can you find any artworks made by women?	
Are there artist names on the labels?	
Is this a Western or non-Western culture?	
Are there ancient or contemporary works presented, or both?	
What galleries are on either side of this gallery?	

4. Find the **European** galleries. Look around carefully and answer the following questions:

Is this a prime or valuable location?	
What floor is it located on?	
How much space, relative to the rest of the museum, is dedicated to this gallery?	
Are the galleries spacious and roomy?	
Are the objects cluttered together or spaced apart?	
What color are the walls?	
Is the lighting sufficiently bright?	
Are the object labels in good condition?	
Can you find any artworks made by women?	
Are there artist names on the labels?	
Is this a Western or non-Western culture?	
Are there ancient or contemporary works presented, or both?	
What galleries are on either side of this gallery?	

## **Synthesize Your Observations with Class Discussions and Readings**

5) Artist Fred Wilson writes about an experiment in which he displayed objects in three different physical settings: a white cube; a space that looked like an ethnographic museum; and a turn-of-the-century salon space.<sup>31</sup>

- a. How might the physical qualities of the space in which an object is displayed affect the perception of the object?
- b. Name an object that you saw at the museum whose significance might change if it were displayed in a different manner, and describe how you would change the physical environment to achieve this.

6) Fred Wilson writes about the Seattle Art Museum and the way the floor plans are organized. He describes a narrative as the visitor visits the first galleries, in prime locations (ancient Roman and Greek), then the 18th, 19th, and 20th century European galleries, “creating a linear history connecting the glories of ancient Greece and Egypt with the...European/American art.”<sup>32</sup>

- a. How do the arrangement and locations of the DMA galleries compare with Wilson’s description?
- b. Where are the Western galleries located?
- c. Where are the non-Western galleries located?
- d. Do you think the locations and/or conditions of these galleries impart any meaning about the relative value of the collections?

7) Ivan Karp writes, “What is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity. Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural “others” are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and “other.”<sup>33</sup>

- a. Did you observe the museum, through their exhibition size, location, décor, or arrangement, placing a greater value on any culture? Explain your answer.
- b. In your observations at the museum, did you detect whether art museum staff organized the galleries as “self” or “other,” either deliberately or not? If so, which

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<sup>31</sup> Wilson, “The Silent Message.”

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, “The Silent Message.”

<sup>33</sup> Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 15.

galleries do you think the art museum presents as “self” and which galleries are presented as “other?”

1. Ancient Greek and Roman
2. African
3. Ancient American
4. European

8) Karp writes, “From one point of view the most powerful agents in the construction of identity appear to be neither the producers of objects nor the audience but the exhibition makers themselves, who have the power to mediate among parties who will not come into face-to-face contact.”<sup>34</sup>

a. Is it possible for a museum (intentionally or not) to reinforce stereotypes about an entire culture through an exhibition of objects? Did you see any cultural stereotypes in your museum visit?

b. List adjectives that describe the identity of each of the galleries that you visited, based on the objects that you saw and the mode of their installation:

1. Ancient Greek and Roman
2. African
3. Ancient American
4. European

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<sup>34</sup> Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 15.

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