

What's the Difference? Art and Ethnography in Museums

Illustration 1: Section of Mexican exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Illustration 2: Section of the Mexican exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The American Museum of Natural History are two very different types of museums. They have different mission statements and collecting and display philosophies, yet in some cases, they contain eerily similar exhibitions, especially in the ethnographic sections of each museum. I am going to focus on the Mexican exhibits in each museum, and I would like to explore how the museums are able to fit such similar pieces into their collections, how they justify these exhibits within their mission statements, and whether or not these similar exhibits create a competition between these museums, which, in theory at least, should not be competing.

The mission statement of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is to “collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.” What qualifies as art is so subjective, such that this mission statement really does not inherently exclude anything from the museum's collections. The first definition of art in the dictionary is “the quality, production, expression, or realm, according to aesthetic principles, of what is beautiful, appealing, or of more than ordinary

significance.” This makes it clear that what gives “art” its significance, whether more than ordinary or not, is its aesthetic value.

The American Museum of Natural history has a quite different mission statement. This states that the museum wants to “discover, interpret, and disseminate – through scientific research and education – knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe.” While this seems very reminiscent of Douglas Adams' question of Life, the Universe, and Everything, and seem a little broad as a mission for one institution, the main aspect that can be pulled out of it is that these broad meanings will be seen through the perspective of scientific research and education. This means that the pieces in the museum should be presented as objective and evidential.

What this means is that, while it is justifiable for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History to have similar, or even identical, objects in their exhibits, these objects should be presented differently and seen from different perspectives. In the art museum, the pieces should be judged by their aesthetic value and their craftsmanship and in the science museum the pieces should be judged by what they can tell us about the cultures which created them. If I were looking at these mission statements, knowing that each museum has an exhibition of Mexican objects, I would be led to believe that they would be two very different presentations. This is why I find it so intriguing that the exhibits are so similar. And yet the exhibits do not seem to be in competition with each other, or the curators would be forced to differentiate their exhibits somehow.

This all leads me to believe that the reasons that the museums can have such

similar exhibits without being in competition is that the visitors to the museums experience the artifacts differently because of the context of the museums. An object put in an art museum will be seen as art, especially an art museum as renowned as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That same object put in a science museum will be seen as evidence. It is not the objects themselves which are pieces of art or science, but the context in which they are placed.

It is also, however, a possibility that the general visitor to either (or both) of these museums does not look closely enough at these exhibits to be bothered by the similarities. Neither exhibit is seen as one of the most “important” or memorable sections of these museums, and the rooms in which the exhibits are shown are laid out in such a way that it is quite easy to walk through them, just a way to get to another, more exciting exhibit.

James Clifford asks in his essay “On Collecting Art and Culture”, “What criteria validate an authentic cultural or artistic product...What moral and political criteria justify 'good,' responsible, systematic collecting practices?” I believe these questions must be asked about the Mexican, and all of the ethnographic exhibits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History. They both have such large collections that only a very small percentage actually makes it on display, and so their selection process is critical. How does each museum choose to focus on the object's artistic or cultural aspects, and why do certain pieces get chosen over others? Clifford also goes on to remind us that “the categories of the beautiful, the cultural, and the authentic have changed and are changing.” So how have these exhibits been seen in the

past? Have they converged from very different things to what they are now, or did they start out the same way, and just have not changed much since their creation?

In order to deal with these last questions, we should look at the history of each of the museums. Both museums opened around 1870 as recreational and educational places for the public to view the then small collections which were donated by philanthropists. They both quickly outgrew the spaces they owned and had to move to larger locations in order to continue to maintain and preserve their collections (1872 for the American Museum of Natural history and 1873 for the Metropolitan Museum of Art), eventually ending up in their current locations in upper Manhattan, across Central Park from each other.

The Met's collection originally consisted of a Roman sarcophagus and almost two hundred paintings, mostly European. While it had small collections of ethnographic objects throughout most of its history, they did not put in a real effort to collect and display these types of objects until 1969, when Nelson A. Rockefeller made a donation of his collection, containing more than three thousand pieces. This collection now holds more than eleven thousand pieces from sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas, all housed in the Rockefeller wing in the museum.

The Museum of Natural history has been collecting and displaying ethnographic objects since its founding. The most active era of the museums acquisitions of these materials was from 1897 to 1902, when Franz Boas became the assistant curator in the Department of Ethnology and set out on an expedition to the North Pacific. While the collections found during that expedition are now part of the largest and most

comprehensive collections from that part of the world, the Hall of Mexico and Central America was not opened until 1970.

I do not know if there was a lack of Mexican artifacts in American Museums until so much later than most of the rest of the world was represented because of political issues during the Mexican Revolution, which ended in 1929, or if it was simply because of a lack of interest in the topic of Mexican art and culture. Either way, these exhibits were relatively recent additions to both the Museum of Natural History and the Met. This makes it quite possible that the Museum of Natural History modeled this exhibit based on their other ethnographic exhibits. They had a century of collecting and displaying these types of objects to lean on in the curation of this exhibit. The Met, however, put all of their ethnographic collections together at once, and had nothing in their own collections from which to base the design of their exhibit. It is quite possible that they simply looked at what the Museum of Natural History had been doing and used that as the basis of their design.

If the Met used the already well established ethnographic exhibits as the model for their newly acquired collections, this would explain how the two exhibits ended up being so similar. This does not, however, answer the question of why these exhibits have stayed so similar to each other, and why neither has had any significant changes since their incorporation into their respective museums. Perhaps we can find some more significant difference between the two exhibits if we look at them a bit closer. The objects themselves are practically identical, but how they are presented to the museum-goers may change how they are seen.

This led me to take a closer look at the plaques describing the different pieces and places represented in the Mexican exhibits in the Met and the Museum of Natural History. Because they are such different museums, with different missions, one representing art and the other science, then the ways in which the artifacts are presented should reflect those missions. This, however, is not what I found. The plaques for Vera Cruz, a region in Mexico, are good examples of the museums further lack of differentiation. I will reproduce the writings on each here and see if you can tell the difference:

“The central Vera Cruz clay sculpture...comes from various localities in a region inland from the city of Vera Cruz. Known as Remojadas, the principle style group is characterized by brown and tan clay, often decorated with black resin paint. Many of the figures, which vary in size, have very lifelike poses; the smiling face figures are the best known examples of the style. The greatly varied pottery seen here, made from finer textured clay than the sculpture, covers a wider region of Vera Cruz, both to the north and south. These examples represent a number of styles, some of unknown local origin. Several of these pottery pieces are as finely made as any in Middle America.”

The second plaque reads as follows:

“During much of the first millennium A.D., artistic production was prolific in the Mexican state of Vera Cruz, which runs long and narrow along the humid, low lying Gulf Coast. Ceramic and stone objects of considerable artistic invention and technical mastery were produced. Ceramic sculpture in particular grew in scale to include some of the largest and most detailed pieces ever to be fired in ancient Mexico. The ceramic works,

which are frequently in human form, are found in caches as well as graves, and exhibit great stylistic variety. Among the style groups, which are named for the places where important finds have been made, are Remojadas, Nopiloa, and El Zapotal. Works designated Remojadas come from central Vera Cruz and include many 'smiling' figures – medium-sized hollow figures of an engaging aspect remarkable within the general severity of Mexican imagery. Nopiloa figures, often depicting women and children, appear somewhat to the south of the Remojadas area, and they are smaller, whiter, and more elaborately detailed. Some of these small- to medium-sized Vera Cruz figures were made as either whistles or rattles, as were certain Maya ceramic figures of this period. The function of such sound-producing objects is not known. El Zapotal, not far from Nopiloa, has given its name to monumental ceramic sculptures that sometimes represent identifiable deities.”

Both of these plaques were accompanied by a map of the region. They both deal mainly with the form of the pottery that comes from that region – what types of clay the pieces are made out of and what it is usually made into. Neither, however, deal very closely with the people who made the pottery or what the different pieces were made for. While they both made it clear that life-like figures are a large feature of the Vera Cruz pottery, they do not specify what the purpose of these figurines were. They could have been used as religious idols, toys for children, or even just as decoration. I cannot tell if all of the people living in the different regions of Vera Cruz were of the same group or if they were different tribes who simply lived near each other. I do not know if the pots were used for cooking, storage, or transportation. The second of these plaques does go

into a little more detail about the pieces when they mention the whistles and rattles which were similar to pieces found in Mayan collections and when they mention that some of the figurines resemble known deities, but they do not go on to suggest uses for the pieces or elaborate on the religions of which these deities were a part.

Given the information shown on the plaques, it is impossible to tell which one came from the Met and which came from the Museum of Natural History. They both seem to focus primarily on the aesthetic features of the artifacts and show an almost complete lack of knowledge about the people who made them and the uses for them. It might surprise you to find out that the second plaque, which does exhibit a little more knowledge of the people and the uses of the artifacts is from the Metropolitan Museum of Art while the first plaque, which is very basic in its detail and talks almost exclusively of the materials used to make the pieces, is from the American Museum of Natural History. One would think, given the missions of the respective museums, that it would be the other way around. While the process of making the pottery is important to anthropologists, the uses of the pieces and how they fit into the cultures which they represent should be in the forefront of a science museum.

Kate Sturge, in an essay "Museum Representations" talks about ethnographic museums, and what the visitor should be able to get out of them. She states that "like ethnographies, museums construct spaces or slots of meaning inside which other cultures can be made intelligible to the museum visitor, and they give verbal information that answers the visitor's question 'What does it mean?'" In the case of the Mexican exhibits at the Met and the Museum of Natural History, this question does not get answered. Neither

museum has sufficiently constructed a “space of meaning” or even separated out different meaning which could be gleaned from these artifacts. There are a wealth of cultures in ancient Mexico which have been studied and more than enough information known about each of them to be passed on to museum-goers. There are also numerous different types of artifacts, styles of art, and religious beliefs and idols which could be covered in the exhibits about this region of the world. If any of these were explored in greater depth, then the museums would much more easily be able to differentiate themselves by virtue of which aspects they chose to focus on and which pieces they saw as most significant to their missions. However, by giving so little detail on the cultures which created these pieces or explaining why one sculpture should be seen as “better” or “more important” than another, we, as the museum-goers, lose out on the meanings which could be gained from the artifacts exhibited.

Now we must ask what meanings are gleaned from the Mexican exhibits in these museums. Since the objects themselves are so similar and the descriptions and explanations of the pieces are nearly identical, why would someone wishing to learn more about Mexican art and culture choose one museum over another? Would there be some sort of advantage to going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art over the American Museum of Natural History or visa versa? Or would a serious researcher simply go to another museum altogether? How would the museum-goer or researcher even know if the information they are looking at is recent or up to date with current anthropological research and new finds?

In Sturge's essay on museum representations, she states “dusty as some museum

may seem to the visitor, not one of them can really remain static, any more than a literary translation can remain unaffected by the passage of time around it.” This means that, while these exhibits do tend to seem a little “dusty” and out of date, the ways in which we see them has changed over time. The problem with this, however, is that the museums have not altered their exhibits to more accurately reflect how people are now looking at them. Both of the exhibits I have been talking about were constructed in the late 1960's to the early 1970's. This was a time when people were fighting for social rights and cultures which were considered “other” were brought to the forefront. It was a huge step for the Metropolitan Museum of Art to even consider having ethnographic art in their display cases, because this was a validation of a culture which before then had been seen as less civil or sophisticated than the European cultures generally presented. Perhaps at that time it was enough simply to show the pieces - that made a large enough statement. Just showing the pieces, however, is not enough now.

The American Museum of Natural History states that they want to discover, interpret, and disseminate knowledge about human culture, the natural world, and the universe. If this is what they truly intend to do, then how can they justify giving so little information about the people they are trying to represent? It seems that both of these institutions have become stuck in their nineteenth century philosophies where museums were mausoleums and the visitors were expected to come with their own knowledge on the topics being presented. They are places where these artifacts, which represent life and cultures and people who are long gone, are put to rest. It is where they go to when the die and the museum-goers can gaze upon them with as they would the corpse of a distant

uncle – wishing for more without quite knowing what that more would have been. These artifacts cannot show us how life was lived in ancient Mexico on their own, they need some sort of context, which is sadly lacking in both museums.

So how do an art museum and a science museum justify having such similar exhibits? They don't – and I do not think they would even bother to if asked. From what I have seen, these exhibits were put up in the 1970's using a model for ethnographic exhibits which was already at least a century old, and they have not been changed since. Perhaps the exhibits are seen differently by the visitors because of the contexts of the rest of their respective museums, or perhaps no one is really looking all that closely. Either way, neither exhibit succeeds to the extents that their museum's missions say that they should. Neither museum does much in the way of education or dissemination, and the aesthetic properties of the pieces are only dryly described and not put into a larger context. Both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History need to revamp their exhibits in order to bring them into the twenty-first century and to better reflect the way that people are looking at the pieces and other cultures – that is, if anyone is really looking.

Works Cited

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