

Die Wunderkammer der schmutzigen Geheimnisse, or A Museum History of Omitted Facts

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Abstract

Taking Eva Cockcroft's 1974 paper, Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War as the point of departure, the paper examines the role museums play in cultural politics in the post-colonial age. Framing the discussion within Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, the paper examines the role of the Museum of Modern Art during the Cold War, and its effects on the foreign intelligentsia – steps that were crucial in order to establish the cultural supremacy of New York and America. The paper also looks back further in time, so as to establish where such a precedent was set, and challenges the notion of the wunderkammer-to-museum evolutionary narrative as one established and maintained so as to retain the Occident's status as the progenitor and tastemaker within the sphere of international cultural politics. Lastly, the paper proposes a re-looking of museums, not just as repositories of material culture, but as the product of a material culture as well. In considering the meteoric rise of Oriental economies, the paper cautions that the increase in the number of monumentally scaled museums in the Orient may be indicative of a delayed onset of mimicry that Homi K. Bhabha speaks of – teetering on an epoch marking a reversal in cultural imperialism.

Introduction

The use of art to further political ends is nothing new to history, yet in recalling the events of the Cold War, the genre that comes to mind is Socialist Realism which was sealed as the state art form by the Soviet Union by way of the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress. Convened by Andrei Zhdanov with the help of Maxim Gorky, Zhdanov made the speech which would define the boundaries of the Soviet Union's state art genre.¹ Despite receiving significant academic coverage, the use of American Abstract Expressionist paintings by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to further American political agendas abroad seems to be a fact which is often forgotten.

Eva Cockcroft's paper *Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of The Cold War*, first published in *Artforum* in 1974 has been noted as the first to present the compelling case of its use to further an American political agenda abroad.² Kimmelman, while critiquing the arguments of revisionist writers such as Cockcroft, also admits that "exhibitions sent abroad, like 'The New American Painting,' participated in a cultural campaign to fight communism."³ Since the publication of Cockcroft's paper, her ideas have been expanded upon by newer Cold War researchers such as Stuart D. Hobbs in *The End of the American Avant Garde*; and Frances Stonor Saunders in *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. Despite a documentary titled *Hidden Hands: A Different History of Modernism* made for BBC's Channel 4, and news articles run by *The Independent*,⁴ *The New Yorker*,⁵ and *The New York Times* amongst others,⁶ the information still comes as a surprise to many.

Cockcroft holds that during the period of the 1940s, the Museum of Modern Art was "a minor war contractor, fulfilling 38 contracts for cultural materials totalling \$1,590,234 for The Library of Congress, The Office of War Information, and especially Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs."⁷ Funding was primarily through a CIA conduit, and the primary goal was to "influence the foreign intellectual

¹ Scott, H.G., and Andrei A. Zhdanov. "Soviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature." In *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Conference*. Praeger, 1980.

² Kimmelman, Michael. "Revisiting the Revisionists." In *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2000.

³ Ibid

⁴ Saunders, Frances Stonor. "Modern Art Was CIA 'weapon'" *The Independent*, October 22, 1995. Accessed April 2, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>.

⁵ Menand, Louis. "Unpopular Front - American Art and the Cold War." *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2005.

⁶ Joffe, Josef. "America's Secret Weapon." *The New York Times on the Web*. April 23, 2000. Accessed April 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/23/reviews/000423.23joffet.html>.

⁷ Cockcroft, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War." *Artforum* 15, no. 10 (1974): 39-41.

community and to present a strong propaganda image of the United States as a 'free' society as opposed to the 'regimented' communist bloc."⁸ Of the various artistic genres that proliferated in the United States during the Cold War period, the works of the Abstract Expressionists were deemed most suitable for this role. This was due to the fact that the works stood as a "perfect contrast to 'the regimented, traditional, and narrow' nature of 'socialist realism'." Today, works by the Abstract Expressionists such as those by Pollock, Kooning, Newman, and Rothko, are some of the most expensive artworks traded on the private market.

While one cannot ascribe the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 entirely to the effects of American Abstract Expressionism propaganda abroad, its role in shaping the perceptions of America and American values amongst the foreign intelligentsia cannot be denied. When the actions chronicled by Cockcroft are framed within Antonio Gramsci's framework of cultural hegemony, it becomes clear that museums can no longer be seen as mere repositories, but may also function as a tool to further a state's goal of consolidating cultural capital. In evaluating the effects of museums on cultural identities, this paper will show that the establishment of museums in the West was one of the fundamental steps towards establishing the concept of westernisation-as-modernity; and how the rapid increase in museums in the Orient today may perhaps be indications that humanity is headed towards a shift in the seat of cultural hegemony from the Occident to Orient.

The Effects of MoMA Abroad

In conceiving of Abstract Expressionism as the antithesis to the state-mandated genre of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union, one would reckon that the works of the Abstract Expressionists would gain little traction in the communist state. Yet as Chartrand and McCaughey have noted, "with respect to the Soviet Union, it is the works of the Czarist period that receive critical acclaim in the West, not the works of socialist realism. With respect to Western art, it is the popular cultural products; for example, Hollywood movies and rock music-that are eagerly sought after within socialist and communist countries, not the works of socialist realism."⁹ This situation was likely to have arisen after the death of Stalin in 1953, which resulted in a state of unrest within the Eastern Bloc.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Chartrand, Harry Hillman, and Claire McCaughey. "The Arm's Length Principle and the Arts." *Who's to Pay? for the Arts: The International Search for Models of Support*, 1989.

Young Russian artists between the 1950s and 60s were observed to have become increasingly enamoured with western aesthetic ideals, a direct result of their romanticisation of American painting.¹⁰ The Russian painters' encounters with Abstract Expressionism, either directly or indirectly, had resulted in the assimilation of American aesthetic practice into their own practices.¹¹ In 1959, the opening of *The National Exhibition of American Art* which was presented in Moscow, allowed the Soviet public to see for the first time the works of Rothko, Pollock, Kooning, and other Abstract Expressionists of the era. The exhibition was accompanied by a trade show featuring American products. Jane Sharp marks this moment in Cold War history as one of the definitive moments of change; where "a new generation would recognise itself transformed on the streets of Moscow, sporting crew cuts, white tee shirts, and jeans."¹²

The National Exhibition of American Art was a state funded-endeavour to promote "cultural exchange" between America and the Soviet Union, yet when one considers current circumstances; it becomes clear that the "exchange" was not only lopsided, but resulted in the subjugation of a culture by another. While Coca-Cola has become the top selling beverage manufacturer in Russia,¹³ it's unlikely that the typical American knows what Kvass is, or even Semyon Chuikov for that matter.

Eva Cockcroft has noted the similarities between the functions of state driven cultural propaganda abroad and MoMA's international programs, and has even highlighted how the programs were often mutually supportive.¹⁴ Established in 1929, the idea of the MoMA was set in motion by Abby Rockefeller, wife of John D. Rockefeller Jr. who was one of the wealthiest Americans of the era. With trustees such as Paul J. Sachs, grandson of founder of Goldman Sachs, MoMA was essentially the offspring of the American financial elites. The first President of MoMA was Abby Rockefeller's son, Nelson Rockefeller, who would later on become the Vice-President of the USA. Another influential figure in the Cold War, Thomas W. Braden, had served as MoMA's executive secretary prior to joining the CIA.¹⁵

The role MoMA played in the 1940s had set the tone for the future activities of the museum. Between the years of 1954 to 1962, MoMA paid for all the US pavilions at the

¹⁰ Sharp, Jane A. "Abstract Expressionism as a Model of "Contemporary Art" in the Soviet Union." In *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*. Rutgers University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ "Cola Wars In Russia (Part 1) -- Trefis." Trefis. December 19, 2013. Accessed April 3, 2015. <http://www.trefis.com/stock/pep/articles/219370/cola-wars-in-russia-part-1/2013-12-19>.

¹⁴ Cockcroft

¹⁵ Ibid

Venice Biennale, averaging 3 Abstract Expressionists painters per show.¹⁶ In addition to Venice, MoMA had also presented in shows in Venezuela, India, Japan, and others. In 1956, a show featuring 12 abstract expressionists curated by MoMA toured 8 European cities.¹⁷ Funded by the Rockefeller family's millions, the goal was to export American culture to places that were considered vital to Rockefeller interests.¹⁸

The funders of MoMA during the period of the Cold War were tied to the financial elite of America; in addition to the Rockefellers, the Whitneys, Paleys, Blisses, Warburgs, and Lewisohns were all considerable benefactors of the museum.¹⁹ The export and acceptance of American culture and products worldwide would have been crucial to maintaining their economic stronghold. The promotion of the Abstract Expressionists abroad was crucial in establishing America as the cultural centre of the world of the era, in spite of the fact that the artists weren't nearly as popular on home grounds at that time.²⁰ With MoMA as an agent of cultural imperialism, the wealthy elite were able to utilise "Abstract Expressionism, 'the symbol of political freedom,' for political ends" abroad.²¹

Screw the *Wunderkammer* – Where the Precedent Was Set

The British Museum is considered by many to be the first public museum in the world.²² Although the origins of the modern museum are often attributed to the *Wunderkammer*, or the cabinets of curiosities during the Enlightenment period, some scholars have warned against the establishment of such a link. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Professor Emeritus at the University of Leicester's Museum studies program, "warns against 'the search for "origins" and a "tradition" ' because it leads to 'a search for similarities rather than differences, and the specific set of political, cultural, economic, and ideological relations that characterise different historical manifestations is rendered invisible, and is therefore effectively lost.' "²³ Other scholars have also highlighted the incompatibility between the methodology of selection and classification between cabinets and

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Guilbaut, Serge. "Success: How New York Stole The Notion of Modernism from the Parisians, 1948." In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

²¹ Cockcroft

²² "History of the British Museum." British Museum. Accessed April 4, 2015.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history.aspx.

²³ Yanni, Carla. *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 20.

museums.²⁴ Yet there remain stronger arguments that can be made in support of the abandonment of the imagined *wunderkammer*-to-museum evolution theory – it is time to abandon the dated Hegelian dialectic of Occidental supremacy and a Eurocentric worldview.

Hegel's distinction between the Occident and Orient was the ability of self-reflexivity, which was neatly encapsulated in a statement in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: "The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit — Man *as such* — is free; and because they do not know this they are not free. They only know that *one is free*."²⁵ Hegel had placed the German nations as the first to be aware of such a consciousness,²⁶ and the individual who embodied such a consciousness would later be encapsulated in Heidegger's concept of the *Dasein* – he who is aware of oneself.²⁷ Was there self-awareness before the rise of Germanic thought? It would be rather ludicrous that one can conceive of an "other" without the concept of "self", and numerous thinkers since then, including Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Rey Chow, have been dismissive of the Hegelian claim.

Its dismissal nonetheless, had come too late. For by the emergence of these thinkers, most of the thought in the Oriental world had already been moulded by the effects of colonialism and its excuse of a grand-salvational plan to bring modernity to everywhere else that was not the Occident. The distinction between the primitive and modern was founded on the Eurocentric belief that Europe was the most culturally advanced civilisation based on the study of the material culture at home and abroad. The unilineal theory of cultural evolution, or cultural development, propelled by anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and Louis Henry Morgan during the Victorian era postulated varying stages of human development ranging from savagery to civilisation based entirely on the products of the peoples.²⁸ Yet, the cultures examined by Tylor and Morgan were of their own time and not from history, and in this respect, is it possible to equate material produce as a signifier of primitivism or modernity?

The development of the theory of cultural relativism by Franz Boas and his successors successfully debunked the theories of the likes of Tylor and Morgan.²⁹ Yet, the

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, and J. Sibree. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1902.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper, 1962.

²⁸ Kinzer, Heath, and Judith L. Gillies. "Cross-Cultural Analysis." The University of Alabama. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://anthropology.ua.edu/cultures/cultures.php?culture=Cross-Cultural Analysis>.

²⁹ Ibid

prescription of the term "primitive" to contemporary cultures still persists today; based entirely on the study of the material culture of a community. The consequence of this is that the role of a museum-as-repository and museum-as-institute is forever displaced; and that museums themselves should be seen as a product constituting the material culture. As such, the study of museums can no longer be merely about their contents, but what the museum means in itself.

The word museum is itself derivative from the Greek word *Μουσεῖον (Mouseion)*, where the *mouseion* was a temple devoted to the muses, and as such, a building which was set aside for the study of the arts and a repository of knowledge.³⁰ Such buildings however, were not first conceived of by the Greeks, and the earliest of such buildings, akin to the concept of the museums of today, is approximately 2500 years old and resides in modern day Iraq. Ennigaldi-Nanna's "museum" is thought to be the oldest example, established circa 530BC in Mesopotamia, it is indicative of humanity's first attempt at the study of material culture.³¹ Archaeological digs of the site have shown the systematic labelling of objects housed within the ancient building; and many of the objects housed are believed to have been excavated by Ennigaldi's father, or previously collected by Nebuchadnezzar II.³² The museum can therefore be conceived as a repository of historical and archaeological artefacts predating Ennigaldi herself.

With Ennigaldi-Nanna's systematic museum predating the chaotic *Wunderkammer* by some 2000 years, one ought to question the precise reason as to why some of the museums of today, such as the British Museum, would choose to affiliate themselves with chaos in spite of an overwhelming body of evidence highlighting predecessor orderliness. The British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery is symbolic of the *Wunderkammers* which flourished during the Enlightenment.³³ Noting that one of its seven sections is devoted to "the birth of archaeology" during the Enlightenment period,³⁴ it seems to be in bad taste that a famous "modern" museum should choose to disregard established facts so as to glorify its past "accomplishments". Of course, one may have just been ignorant, but perhaps it is also equally terrifying that an institution as respectable as the British Museum, and one of the "pioneers" in archaeology, does not

³⁰ Findlen, P. "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology And Renaissance Genealogy." *Journal of the History of Collections*, 1989, 59-78.

³¹ Lewis, Geoffrey D. "History of Museums." In *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 15th ed. Vol. 2. Encyclopædia Britannica, 1997.

³² Ibid

³³ "Enlightenment (Room 1)." British Museum. Accessed April 4, 2015.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/themes/room_1_enlightenment.aspx.

³⁴ "Enlightenment (Room 1)." British Museum. Accessed April 4, 2015.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/themes/room_1_enlightenment.aspx.

read the Encyclopædia Britannica thoroughly enough to realise that Ennigaldi's father was pioneering archaeology 2000 years before them.

The "accomplishments" of contention are none other than the British Museum's destruction of foreign cultures and looting of artefacts. In *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*, Inderpal Grewal presents two examples:

"The preface of the 1899 museum catalogue describing antiquities from Benin contains a narrative of their acquisition in which the reader/viewer is told that the objects had been obtained 'by a recent successful expedition sent to Benin to punish the natives of that city for a treacherous massacre of a peaceful English mission.' The destruction of Benin City is shown to be a punishment of its natives that 'made accessible to students of ethnography the interesting works of native art which form the subject of the following pages.'... An 1890 guidebook to the museum, after a preface that lists its collections, adds that the main part of the Egyptian collection was laid 'by the acquisition in 1802 of the antiquities which passed into the possession of the British army on the capitulation of Alexandria in the previous year.'"³⁵

For the British Museum then, it was clear that nothing meant punishment and capitulation more than the enrichment of their collection to signify their devotion to the muses.

Grewal has noted that the establishment of the museum was in part to "civilise" the public and the working classes.³⁶ Of greater importance however, is how the British Museum "continued and furthered the rise of imperialism, another function of nationalism."³⁷ In this regard, the opening of the British Museum to the public constitutes a form of state-driven propaganda directed at the masses to foster a national identity which could not exist, except in contrast to the identities abroad. Does the punishment of "natives" not posit Great Britain of that era to be in a position of superiority and capable of disseminating moral justice? To paraphrase the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre writing on French Algeria, the colonisers in establishing themselves as

³⁵ Grewal, Inderpal. "Guidebook and the Museum." In *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

civilised human beings reduce the "natives" to a state of sub-humanity; and Human Rights do not apply to the subhuman.³⁸

The death of "a peaceful English mission" is therefore a "treacherous massacre", while the sacking of the Benin Empire, a sovereign and independent state, is a righteously distributed divine justice. One would presume that the looting of the city and the Benin Bronzes which now reside in the British Museum constitutes compensation since human lives are worth much more than subhuman ones. The museum catalogue of 1899 also seems to have left out numerous other details penultimate to their sacking of Benin – they had been attempting to annexe the monarchy since as early as 1892.³⁹

The museum as an agent of propaganda goes back much earlier than the activities of MoMA during the Cold War. The British Museum in its presentation of foreign artefacts was able to foster a sense of national pride with respect to their nation's conquests. In light of the sheer volumes of misrepresentation however, British nationalism with regard to their museum is clearly misplaced. Homi K. Bhabha, quoting a verse from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, encapsulates the sentiment perfectly, "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means."⁴⁰

The Rise of Museums in the Orient

The recent destruction of a museum in the city of Mosul by the terrorist group ISIS was met with the media equivalent of a sigh. Despite the destruction of a genuine 1300 year old Assyrian statue, the world is kindly informed by the Daily Mail that the majority of the ancient statues destroyed were "FAKES".⁴¹ With the rise of the ISIS affiliate Boko Haram in Nigeria, previously the seat of the Benin Empire, thank goodness the Benin Bronzes are safely tucked away in the British Museum! Yet the "fakes" in Mosul weren't so much fakes, as they were replicas, and can therefore constitute the museum's desire of presenting past cultures in the region.⁴² It is relevant to ponder if the destruction of a

³⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Albert Memmi's The Colonizer and Colonized." In *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*. London: Routledge, 2001.

³⁹ Hernon, Ian. *Britain's Forgotten Wars: Colonial Campaigns of the 19th Century*. Sutton Publishing, 2003. 409.

⁴⁰ Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction." In *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

⁴¹ Hall, John. "'Ancient Statues' Destroyed by ISIS in Mosul Were FAKES - and the Originals Are Safely Stored in Baghdad, Claims Iraqi Museum Director ." Mail Online. March 16, 2015. Accessed April 5, 2015.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2996859/Ancient-statues-destroyed-ISIS-Mosul-FAKES-originals-safely-stored-Baghdad-claims-Iraqi-museum-director.html>.

⁴² Ibid

Madame Tussauds in New York or London would have been met with similar relief since *IT WASN'T REALLY PRINCE WILLIAM THAT MELTED!*

The rise of economic powerhouses in the Orient has coincided with a simultaneous increase in museums in the respective regions – The Louvre in Abu Dhabi, MOCA in Shanghai, M+ in Hong Kong, and the National Gallery Singapore. Be it international brand name museums or self-developed concepts, these museums have taken cue from the methodologies of its Western predecessors. Similarly, all of the states mentioned were once affected to varying degrees of economic and political control by the British Empire. In this respect it is important to consider if the rise of museums in the Orient is in essence indicative of a delayed onset of the mimicry Homi K. Bhabha speaks of, set to undermine the effects of western imperialism.⁴³

Museums in East today function not only as repositories, but serve to tell the world that the culture it is intended to be representative-of not only has its own things to say, but has always been able to and is still able to say it as well as its predecessors in the West. In the words of Rey Chow, the East has become “the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiworks of its others.”⁴⁴ The utilisation of culturally-linked developments such as that of museums, performing arts centres, and galleries have become quantifiers for a state’s cultural development. Is this not a regression to the debunked theory of unilineal cultural evolution where the material culture was indicative of the civilisation’s advancement?

The rise of economies in Asia has made clear to the West that the Orient can no longer be conceived of as the primitive cultures they once posited them to be, but rather, a contemporary in the global cultural arena. In some ways, the West realises its mistakes (for instance, Franz Boaz’s introduction of cultural relativism) as much as it may not always be so steadfast in its admissions (the British Museum still thinks the West invented archaeology). As the nation states which constitute the Orient place an increased emphasis on culturally-linked developments, it is time to consider if we are teetering on an epoch marking the reversal of cultural imperialism.

It took close to two centuries to come to the realisation that Hegel’s claims of the Oriental’s lack of self-reflexivity was grossly erroneous. Yet in the same book, he makes another quote worthy of contemplation – “We learn from history that we do not learn

⁴³ Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man" In *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

⁴⁴ Chow, Rey. "Film As Ethnography." In *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

from history".⁴⁵ Will it take another two centuries to prove another one of his statements right?

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⁴⁵ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, and J. Sibree. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1902.

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